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Finding Your Inner Drag: How Drag Culture Helped Form Freedom of Expression For the LGBTQ Community

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Abstract:

This research paper discusses the history of the LGBTQ community, the effects of the drag community and the comparison to the behaviors and attitudes from the past to the present. This article goes in depth to different scholarly articles that help understand the history of the LGBTQ community. This article will also discuss personal stories and experiences that describe the emotional aspect of the moments of history mentioned. The three main topics discussed in this paper are the Stonewall Riot, the AIDS epidemic and the uprising of the transgender community. After understanding the history and the present attitudes, they will then be critically analyzed and evaluated. I will also be comparing the past events to the present mindset on the LGBTQ community and the acceptance of drag. Readers should expect an understanding of the Drag and LGBTQ history during the 1960's onwards.

Finding Your Inner Drag: How Drag Culture Helped Form Freedom of Expression For the LGBTQ Community

Introduction

Drag has been a part of US culture for as long as we can remember. We can date drag back to Shakespearean times when women were not allowed on stage, however it was not frowned upon during this time. Now we live in a world where performing drag is prevalent in almost every country. However just because it is present, does it mean it is accepted? In this paper, I will be discussing how drag culture affected freedom of expression specifically during the 1960's onwards. This was a very prominent period for LGBTQ history as it served as an era

of freedom during a time of such oppression. To explore the history of drag culture it is important to consider popular icons like Marsha P. Johnson who helped pave the way towards acceptance during a time of hatred.

Marsha P. Johnson was one of the famous drag queens that spoke her mind and really lived, dressed, behaved and breathed the way she wanted to during a time when it was considered illegal to do so. She was a prominent figure during this time as she was able to show other transgendered people and drag queens that there is nothing wrong with being who you are, actually it is better to take the risk of being who you are, rather than hiding from society. Johnson reminds us that you are not truly living until you embrace your inner identity. She said this quote, "I was no one, nobody, from Nowheresville, until I became a drag queen." This emphasizes the toll of hiding your inner identity and how no matter how bad the consequences, it is better to be yourself and to be happy. Marsha truly lived this way from the moment she left her unaccepting family and moved to New York City. Here she was finally able to dress how she wanted to and embodied the woman she knew she was since she was a child. I think it is important to note that the P in Marsha P. Johnson's name stood for Pay no mind. Which is something I'm sure a lot of drag queens lived by during this time.

Now it is important to understand the background of the topics I will be talking about in my paper. My paper will be divided into three main sections along with subsections within each of the three main sections. The three main topics I will be discussing in my paper is the Stonewall riot, the Aids epidemic and the uprising of the transgender community. I have chosen these three main topics because they each highlight either important stepping stones or external effects that caused the LGBTQ community to either progress as a group or the horrible events that caused them to progress as a community. In my paper I will be discussing how drag culture has changed

the course of LGBTQ history and has helped strengthen the voices and identity of the LGBTQ community, especially the transgender community. In this paper I will argue how drag was essential to the LGBTQ liberation movement and how it actually helped inspire the transgender community to embrace their true inner identity.

Stonewall Riot

To begin with the stonewall riot, this is essential to mention in my paper as it was a pivotal time for the drag and LGBTQ community. In her article, Arriola (1995) gives us a summary as to what happened during this time. She explains that after years of living in shadows and being criminalized for expressing themselves turned into a period of rage. After being granted an area of somewhat privacy and safety the stonewall soon turned into a place where they were not welcome anymore. People of color that dressed differently to the sex they were assigned to at birth began getting punished and outed to their friends and family. As a group they claimed the territory of the stonewall as their own and fought for their rights. The stonewall community was an area in New York City where people of the LGBTQ community had the privacy to be themselves, where they were able to drink, eat and dance in peace. However, that changed very quickly (Lazin 2022).

When looking at how violent the riot was, the article, *Queer Law and Order: Sex, Criminality, and Policing in the Late Twentieth-Century United States*, written by Stewart Winter helps us understand the multiple cases of oppression towards the LGBTQ community. Most especially police violence and racial inequality during this time. Winter (2015) discusses the police brutality that took place during this riot and how inhumane the whole situation was entirely. Winter (2015) goes into detail about specific horror stories that happened to numerous

individuals for simply fighting for their own rights. This article does a great job highlighting a number of stories that will help the audience understand how violent the riot was.

I will now be providing some background on how the Stonewall became what it was during the 1960's. The Stonewall in New York was bought off by members of the New York mafia in order to increase revenue as they were able to heighten the price as they were providing a safe space for the LGBTQ community (Rivera 2022). They ensured safety by bribing the cops to stay clear of this area. During this time of secrecy members of the LGBTQ community were able to be themselves. However this slowly started to change and people were outed to their families and criminalized for dressing as the opposing gender. After this started happening the stonewall was not considered a safe space anymore, now it is considered as a monumental part of US history as this was the place where the LGBTQ community and its allies were able to fight for their right of privacy and freedom. What was left was the pieces of artwork that helped describe the pain and courage members of the LGBTQ community had to endeavor during this time (Newton-Jackson 2022) .

Now I would like to reflect on a speech given by Sylvia Rivera, a popular drag queen and openly transgendered person at the time. Rivera delivered a speech that was very influential during this time. Her speech was titled "The Bitch on Wheels". In her speech Johnson recounts the times her and her friends were abused and stereotyped against at their time at the stonewall. She talks with such passion and anger which I believe speaks not just for her but the entire LGBTQ community. She claims that she did not feel she fit in anywhere, "But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war movement, in the women's movement, we were still outcasts." (Rivera 2022). No place was safe for people of color and people who identified as a

part of the LGBTQ community. This speech really emphasizes the pain and hatred towards the political system and the attitudes from unaccepting people within society.

The Stonewall Riot was a pivotal movement in LGBTQ history. Although it did not completely solve the issue at the time it brought more awareness to the situation. It paved a way for the LGBTQ community and created a platform for them where they could speak on and fight for the rights they deserve.

AIDS Epidemic

Moving towards my second topic, the AIDS epidemic, which happened a couple decades after the stonewall riot around the 1980s . When the AIDS epidemic broke out during the 1980s people were quick to blame the LGBTQ community. This is where the rest of society felt they could advocate for criminalization and maltreatment for the LGBTQ community as this caused mass isolation for people who were either openly gay or openly expressive about their clothing choices. This caused even more prejudice, stereotyping and maltreatment towards this community. Because of this, people in the LGBTQ community were forced into unemployment with no just reasoning. This was a very hard time for the LGBTQ community as loved ones were contracting the disease as well as the assumption that if you are a part of the LGBTQ community you were considered to be infected as well. This caused mass unemployment and the continuation of stereotyping.

When looking at the history of the AIDS epidemic, we can get an understanding through the literature during that time. In an article written by Micheal Buso discusses and analyzes different pieces of literature written during that time. In one of the first pieces of literature Buso (2017) explores, it discusses the medical perspective on how AIDS is contracted and spread. According to the article, doctors were claiming that AIDS could not be contracted through

heteronormative sex which was widely controversial. During this time AIDS was fairly new and people did not fully understand how it was contracted or treated. Due to the high amounts of contraction within the gay community people were quick to presume the gay community had started it and were the ones spreading it. As mentioned before this hurts people's abilities to become employed and respected amongst society. Simply identifying as gay would label them as someone to avoid as they must be infected. The case was worse for drag queens and transgendered people as they were unable to hide from stereotypes and biases and had to live in a world where they were feared and not accepted.

Buso (2017) goes on to discuss more literature that discusses the “Godly” aspect of contracting the disease. When doctors would explain how people must abstain from same sex intercourse, they would explain how it was not considered “Godly”. In the article Buso (2017) recounts how doctors would claim it was unnatural to be participating in same sex intercourse as well as it was not considered pleasurable because it was not how God intended it. Buso also explains how doctors would claim that a “healthy vagina” was the best prevention method to avoid sexually transmitted diseases. This was extremely damaging at the time as this was medical advice that many people would trust as it was coming from “authority”. To have such a powerful industry, the medical industry, claiming that homosexual relations lead to disease created a huge stigma around the LGBTQ community.

Overall the AIDS epidemic affected the LGBTQ community greatly. This all took place after the Stonewall Riot. One could imagine how frustrating it is to have fought such a tough battle with the Stonewall riot only to return back to hatred and maltreatment towards the LGBTQ community. As mentioned before the AIDS epidemic heavily affected the drag and transgender community as there was no hiding their identities and their sexual preferences. After the

Stonewall Riot there was an increase in the people that transitioned which led to even more hatred and stereotyping during this time.

Uprising of the Transgender Community

Moving onto my last main topic, the uprising of the transgender community this topic ties in both of my previous topics. To begin it is important to note that the uprising of the drag community only started after the introduction of ballrooms. In these private ballrooms, drag was performed in secret which allowed people to dress and express themselves the way they wanted to without the risk of being outed or judged. During this time drag was an outlet to be able to be the person they truly wanted to be. Which is how transitioning became more widely known and accepted within the LGBTQ community. People who were scared to make the transition were now celebrated in the ballrooms which encouraged them to embrace their inner identity. Once people were able to dress the way they wanted to in private it slowly transitioned into dressing the way they wanted to in public (Horowitz 2013) .

In the book that recently came out, *Legends of Drag : Queens of a Certain Age* written by Harry Hanson discusses personal stories on transitioning during the late 1970's. The book features many personal experiences of transitioning and partaking in the ballrooms. In the New York section of the book Hanson (2022) follows the story of a woman named Egyptt LaBejia and her coming out story. As a young boy Egyptt LaBejia felt very uncomfortable and different in her skin. She explains that after attending her first drag show did she truly understand and celebrate her new identity as a woman. Drag for Egyptt LaBejia was an outlet and a place for her to truly be herself. Once she saw all of her sisters living comfortably in her own skin did she truly feel safe to transform into her gender identity. The reason why I am recounting this personal experience is because many of the other stories in this book have similar outcomes.

Many of the young boys in this book only decided to transition once they were exposed to these ballrooms. Ballrooms were a huge part of the uprising of the transgender community as they were a stepping stone to understanding oneself and one's inner identity.

It is important to note that performing drag was male dominated. In this time period males were able to express themselves in drag within their communities, however women were not treated the same. In the articles previously discussed there was minimal to zero mention of the women drag community, the drag kings. Drag kings are looked down upon or ignored as they were not taken seriously neither were they accepted into the drag community at the time. In the article *En/activist drag: Kings reflect on queerness, queens, and questionable masculinities*, Berbery (2017) sheds light on the exclusivity amongst women in this industry. Although this research paper has been primarily focused on the inclusivity of the LGBTQ community there still was exclusive behavior on their part. Women were not considered a part of drag nor were they invited to drag performances. Drag, although thought to be a very open and accepting community turned out to be quite exclusive itself. Drag kings at this time were not included in the personal recounts of LGBTQ history which was an aspect that only changed recently. Berbery (2017) discusses personal stories from women who have felt excluded from the drag community in the past and in the present.

With the uprising of the transgender community came violence. During the Stonewall Riot and the AIDS epidemic multiple people were outed to their families. In an article that discusses transgendered violence Davis (2022) discusses how identifying as a different gender provoked multiple cases of domestic violence during the 1960s onwards. Since transitioning was not fully understood and accepted, when partners decided to "come out" or were outed outside their choosing, they were placed in unsafe situations with their spouses. Many of the

people mentioned in the article were exposed to physical violence, emotional violence or were disregarded from the family completely.

Comparison to Today's Acceptance of the LGBTQ community

Now it is important to contrast the history we have learned about the LGBTQ community with the attitudes we observe from it today. Although people are not being criminalized for dressing as the opposite gender and expressing themselves does not mean the hatred and the stereotyping has stopped. When reflecting on how today's society understands the need for inclusivity among people in the LGBTQ community we can see that it is still quite limited. I will be reflecting on how we can see homophobia in research as well as we will be looking at studies online that reflect the biases people still hold amongst people in the LGBTQ community.

The article Under-Representation of Transgender Identities in Research: The Limitations of Traditional Quantitative Survey Data, discusses how different transgender identities are not provided in collecting research as well as also not included when accumulating data from participants. Speaking from personal experience, whenever I have participated in a minor study or filled out my information in a doctors clinic, I have rarely been given the opportunity to choose an option besides male and female. However I have seen the option "rather not say" on multiple occasions. Although this is a great option for people who do not necessarily feel comfortable stating their gender, it excludes multiple gender identifications that people may identify with. I believe this also creates a stigma against identifying as another gender is not considered as socially accepted.

In this article, Aiello (2022) explores the options on identifiers in a number of research pools. The participants involved described themselves out of the heteronormative identities, female and male. Within the 95 gender identities that were involved in this study 43% of the

participants were not able to select their gender identity and therefore were not able to participate in said experiments. This just shows how exclusive research can be and with our ever changing world we should accommodate different gender identities within our research as research should never be biased or non inclusive. When looking at research in particular it does complicate the process of analyzing data as there are new groups of genders that need to be considered as opposed to our normative female and male identifiers. However it does not give us the excuse to disregard other participants entirely.

Now let us look at the positives of the acceptance of the LGBTQ community in the media. In the past we have seen very minimal representation of the LGBTQ community. In todays society we can proudly state that Drag, identifying as transgender and homosexual relationships are celebrated amongst media. We have huge shows like Rupaul's Drag Race and popular documentaries like Paris is Burning to represent not only the acceptance of the drag community but as well as the history that lead them to be so accepted within our society.

Analysis

After understanding the history of the LGBTQ community as well as comparing it to today's attitudes within society we can see how we have grown from oppression to acceptance. In order to critically analyze my sources I needed to understand each story that I included in my paper with an unbiased perspective. Many of the personal stories that I have included in my paper allow my readers to truly understand the pain and difference in attitudes during the 1960s as compared to the attitudes now in 2022.

When reading each story I needed to think more qualitatively rather than quantitatively. To maintain an unbiased perspective all the stories I used in my paper were supported by the factual events that took place in the Stonewall riot, the AIDS epidemic and as well as the

uprising of the transgender community. Because this era was not necessarily accepted, there is minimal factual statistics that can be used to express the events that happened during the 1960's. Instead the proof we are left with are the stories left by those who experienced these events during this time.

Although story telling is not necessarily the most factually based evidence needed to conduct a research paper, the stories told give readers a first hand account into the emotional and political understanding of what happened during the 1960's onwards. To have the privilege of understanding different stories from people during this time allowed me to understand and articulate a fraction of what this time period was like and how it affected today's culture.

Each article provided gave me more insight to each of my subtopics. In the case of my first topic, the Stonewall Riot, each source expressed the police brutality and societal isolation that people experienced during this time. The sources also provided from the Stonewall section recounted episodes of violence during this time that were recorded. This allows me to use the personal stories in the articles as they were backed up by police records.

Moving forward to the AIDS epidemic section I was able to obtain information that doctors were promoting during that time. I was able to use this information in my research as this was the information given out during the time of the AIDS outbreak. Although it may not be statistical values the stories of unemployment and fear against the LGBTQ community was enough to show that being a part of the community caused isolation within employment and society. These stories mentioned in these sections allow my readers to understand the influence of religion within doctoral practice and as well as behaviors within society. Due to the fact that religion was prominent and influential during this time, showed that the stories provided in that

section were actual experiences that people had to go through during the AIDS epidemic. I believe that these stories are enough to factual support my research.

The next subsection I was able to critically analyze was the uprising of the transgender community. In this section I really had to analyze each of the stories I was including in a qualitative manner. In order to have a through and accurate understanding of the transitioning of the transgender community during this time I had to consider multiple stories rather than one or two. Although I did not include all the stories in my paper, I was able to analyze each of the stories and find a common pattern within each of them. The common pattern within this section was the introduction of ballrooms. As mentioned earlier in my paper, performing in ballrooms was a large component to transitioning into a different gender identity publically. Many of the stories talk about how drag helped pave the way to accepting and expressing their new gender identity. I believe that by reading and understanding multiple stories and finding a common pattern within them is enough to justify my perspectives within this section. If multiple people are sharing the same stories there must be some truth to their statements and to my statements from those stories.

After analyzing those sections it was important to compare the history of the LGBTQ community to today's attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. Growing up I have always had an admiration for the drag community and hearing their stories about fighting for their rights to be the person they wanted to be. Which most of the time meant leaving everything they had and choosing to do what they wanted and loved despite the disapproval from their families. However, in the events in history I discussed it was not just about leaving their families, but the understanding that they may be isolated from society, criminalized and brutally beaten for just being themselves. This will also allow me to connect this to the present as a lot of the knowledge

I currently have is on the acceptance of the drag community during the present. It is important to compare and contrast both as although we as a society have progressed there are still hidden biases the LGBTQ community experiences today. It was very interesting and insightful to compare moments in history to how drag and the LGBTQ community are perceived in pop culture and the media. It allows me and my audience to understand the effects of history and how we have reached a new era of acceptance.

The LGBTQ community has dealt with many hardships and it is important to recognize and learn about the past to truly understand and be grateful for the freedom we have today. Although we still are dealing with people with closed mindsets within our society we can see how much we have grown as a community to create more inclusivity in our world.

Limitations

It was very difficult to critically analyze my sources as I mentioned previously that they are very story based. There are limitations to my research as my evidence was mainly personal stories. However I believe in order to give my audience a better understanding as to what happened during these events in LGBTQ history is best served through personal stories. With a subject like this it is very difficult to use statistics to understand the emotional toll that each of the events that took place. In order to understand LGBTQ history I believe that stories are essential. There are little records of statistical evidence or research done to provide adequate information on what exactly happened during the time period of the stonewall riot, the AIDS epidemic and as well as the uprising of the transgender community. The stories used, although they cannot be labeled as factual evidence, are the only type of evidence that we can use to understand the history and the current stage of acceptance within the LGBTQ community.

Conclusion:

To conclude I hope that you all have a better understanding of the importance of drag and what it means to the LGBTQ community. Drag is very much alive and celebrated today however it is important to internalize the fight it took them to get to where we are today. Drag was not only about dressing as a different gender but it truly was about freedom of expression despite what society deems as normal. Through hearing stories and reports of violence I believe that people will truly understand how unjust and exclusive society can be when certain groups of people are stigmatized against.

I believe that the articles I touched upon helped create a thorough explanation to the importance of understanding and celebrating LGBTQ history. There were so many events and struggles that lead to the acceptance and inclusivity of our society today. Many of these topics are not discussed in our history classes however they are a large part of US history. It is important to understand these topics as we need to learn how to move towards a more inclusive world. As mentioned earlier in my paper we still have many steps to go to consider our population as inclusive. Although one may not be criminalized anymore for the way they express themselves they are still exposed to violence, stereotyping and disinclusion in places like public bathrooms, being able to be a participant in research, or being able to identify your sexuality in a doctors office. This topic is extremely important and it is our responsibility to truly understand the hardships people went through to get to where we are today.

I hope my paper inspires educational institutions to consider including LGBTQ history within their history courses. Many people today are starting to express and embrace their sexualities and sexual preferences and it is our responsibility to create a safe and understanding environment where they are able to do so. I really hope my paper serves as an opportunity to

learn more about one another and to appreciate the privileges we are given in this period of acceptance.

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