

Performing Resistance: Queer Embodiment, Subversive Humor, and Political Protest in Contemporary Drag Culture Across Global Contexts

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Abstract

Drag culture has transitioned from being a niche performance art to becoming a globally acknowledged platform for queer resistance, integrating both artistic innovation and political discourse. This paper explores modern drag performances as a means of resistance, emphasizing the convergence of queer expression, subversive humor, and political activism in various global settings. Utilizing ethnographic research, performance theory, and queer theory, this study examines how drag artists maneuver through sociopolitical limitations while confronting conventional norms of gender, sexuality, and culture. The research adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating performance content analysis, interviews with drag performers, and case studies from regions such as the United States, Europe, and Asia. The results indicate that drag serves as both entertainment and a medium for political critique, using humor, parody, and spectacle to challenge oppressive social systems. This article enhances the understanding of drag not just as a form of performance art but as a deliberate strategy of queer resistance that balances visibility, empowerment, and community formation within varied sociopolitical environments.

Keywords

Cultural expressions of drag, the embodiment of queerness, acts of political dissent, humor that challenges norms, studies of performance,

worldwide resistance by queer communities, and the performative nature of gender

Introduction

In the past twenty years, drag has gained prominence as a cultural phenomenon, transitioning from being confined to marginalized queer spaces to becoming a staple in mainstream media, all while maintaining its rebellious nature. Fundamentally, drag is a performative art that challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality. While it has roots in LGBTQ+ nightlife, drag has increasingly served as a platform for political expression, social critique, and community building, allowing performers to act as both cultural icons and agents of sociopolitical change.

The global expansion of drag, highlighted by the international success of RuPaul's Drag Race and the growth of drag festivals, demonstrates its capacity to cross cultural boundaries and shape worldwide conversations about identity, gender, and social justice. Beyond mere entertainment, drag artists use humor, satire, and exaggeration to question dominant structures, address systemic injustices, and claim visibility in spaces that have historically excluded queer identities.

This research examines modern drag performances in various global settings, focusing on how queer embodiment and subversive humor function as tools of political resistance. By placing drag within the context of performance studies and queer theory, the study delves into the aesthetic, cultural, and political aspects of drag. The primary questions driving this research include:

1. How does contemporary drag performance articulate queer embodiment and identity?
2. In what ways do subversive humor and parody function as tools of political critique?
3. How do drag practices vary across global contexts in response to differing sociopolitical and cultural conditions?

Gaining an understanding of these dynamics offers essential insights into how drag navigates visibility, agency, and resistance in a world dominated by media and globalization. Additionally, this study places drag within wider discussions about

performativity, resistance, and representation politics, highlighting its importance as both an artistic and activist endeavor.

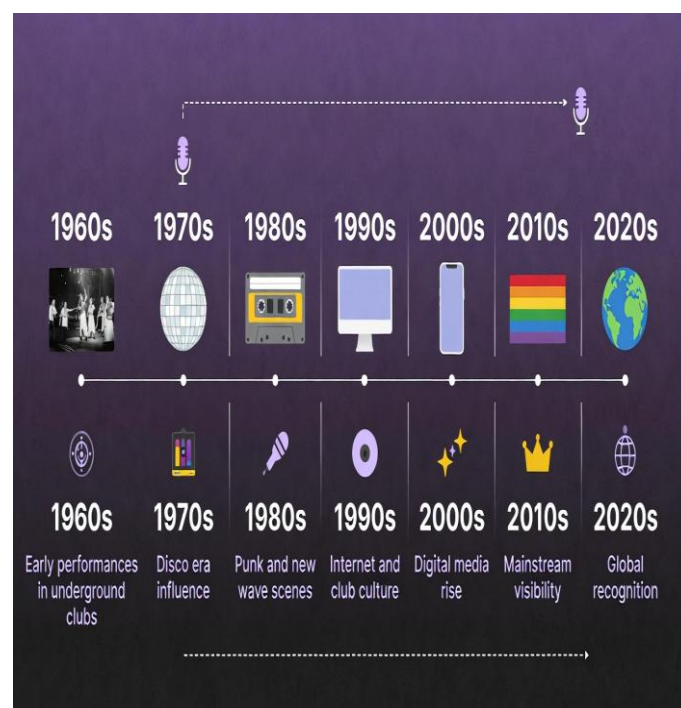


Figure 1: Timeline of global drag culture expansion (1960s–2020s)

Aspect	United States	Europe (e.g., UK, Germany, France, Netherlands)	Asia (e.g., Thailand, Japan, India, Philippines)
Historical Origins	Roots in 19th-century Harlem drag balls (Black queer performers); 1920s "pansy craze"; Stonewall Riots (1969) led by drag queens like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.	Early modern theater (e.g., Elizabethan cross-dressing); 1920s–1930s cabaret scenes (Berlin's Eldorado); post-WWII underground scenes.	Traditional forms like Japanese kabuki onnagata (male actors as women), Thai kathoey/ladyboy performances, Indian hijra/kinnar traditions (often tied to cultural/ritual roles).
Modern Practices & Style	Highly performative, pageant-style glamour; lip-sync heavy; influenced	Diverse: UK often campy/humorous (e.g., pantomime tradition); Berlin underground/experimental/political; more theatrical and cabaret-influenced;	Blends traditional gender-variant roles with modern glamour; Thailand: cabaret-style shows (tourist-oriented,

Aspect	United States	Europe (e.g., UK, Germany, France, Netherlands)	Asia (e.g., Thailand, Japan, India, Philippines)
	by RuPaul's Drag Race (reality TV format); emphasis on comedy, celebrity impersonation, and high-fashion runway looks.	growing pageant style via international Drag Race franchises.	glamorous lip-sync); Japan: more subtle/theatrical; India: often tied to hijra communities (ritualistic, street performance).
Sociopolitical Context	Central to LGBTQ+ liberation (Stonewall as flashpoint); mainstream visibility via Drag Race; recent backlash with anti-drag legislation in some states (2022–2025); seen as political resistance against gender norms.	Generally more accepted in Western Europe; tied to broader queer rights movements; less intense legislative attacks than US but rising conservative pushback; strong in Pride events and cabaret traditions.	Varies widely: Thailand relatively tolerant/celebrated (tourism economy); Japan subtle acceptance; India/parts of South Asia face stigma but rooted in cultural traditions (hijra); many countries criminalize LGBTQ+ expression, making drag risky or underground.
Key Influences & Visibility	RuPaul's Drag Race (global export); mainstream media; intersectional (race, class, trans issues prominent).	Drag Race UK/France/Germany spin-offs; cabaret and club scenes; less commercialized than US but growing international exposure.	Local cabaret (Thailand Pattaya shows); Bollywood/TV influences; Drag Race Thailand; traditional gender-variant figures (kathoei, hijra) blend with modern drag.
Challenges & Backlash	Anti-drag bills (e.g., restrictions on performances near children); culture wars scapegoating;	Rising far-right criticism; occasional moral panic over "family-friendly" events; generally protected by stronger LGBTQ+ laws in many countries.	Legal persecution in many nations; confusion with sex work; tourism exploitation; limited

Aspect	United States	Europe (e.g., UK, Germany, France, Netherlands)	Asia (e.g., Thailand, Japan, India, Philippines)
	violence against performers.		mainstream acceptance outside specific hubs.
Current Status	Highly commercialized and global exporter; mainstream celebrity status; ongoing political flashpoint.	Integrated into queer nightlife and arts; growing but less polarized than US.	Thriving in tourist/cultural pockets; blending tradition and modernity; often more visible in performance tourism than political activism.

Table 1: Comparative overview of drag practices and sociopolitical contexts in the US, Europe, and Asia

Review of Literature

1. Theoretical Frameworks: Queer Theory and Performance Studies

Drag performance has been a central topic for researchers studying gender, sexuality, and performance. Pioneering contributions in queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, identify drag as a platform where traditional gender assumptions are challenged (Butler, 1990). Drag artists purposefully amplify or mock gender norms, demonstrating that gender is a social construct rather than an inherent trait. This performative perspective enables scholars to view drag not merely as a form of entertainment but as a conscious political statement that challenges societal power structures.

Performance studies further frames drag as a form of embodied practice. Researchers like Peggy Phelan (1993) and Richard Schechner (2002) highlight that performance goes beyond mere representation, acting as a transformative force that

creates social meaning through physical actions. In this framework, drag serves as both a visual spectacle and an ethical intervention, offering alternative modes of existing and interacting within public spaces, frequently challenging heteronormative norms.

Subversive humor plays a crucial role in the political potential of drag. Humor, parody, and satire act as resistance tools, enabling performers to critique oppressive systems while remaining accessible to a wide range of audiences (Riley, 2016). This combination of entertainment and critique uniquely positions drag as a space for cultural negotiation, especially in environments where direct political dissent might be limited.

2. Historical Trajectories of Drag Culture

a. Early Drag and Queer Subcultures

In the 20th century, drag became a significant aspect of queer subcultures. The drag balls held in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s, as chronicled by George Chauncey (1994), served as vital venues for performance, social interaction, and the shaping

of identities. These gatherings provided marginalized LGBTQ+ groups with opportunities to create alternative social frameworks, celebrating gender fluidity and using performances as means of self-expression and community defiance.

During the mid-to-late 20th century, drag began to intersect with larger social movements, notably during the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Here, performers and queer activists spurred political action against systemic oppression. Figures like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera embodied the blend of performance, humor, and activism, illustrating how drag could be a tangible instrument for social transformation.

b. Drag in the Global Context

With the rise of globalization and the widespread reach of media, drag culture has extended its influence beyond the confines of Western cities. In Europe, drag has found its place in theater, television, and festivals, where it often merges local performance styles with queer artistic expressions (Rupp, Taylor, & Shapiro, 2010). In Asia, drag performers must navigate intricate cultural and legal landscapes; for example, the Japanese onnagata roles in Kabuki theater intersect with modern LGBTQ+ drag, balancing cultural traditions with contemporary identity issues (McLelland, 2000).

Although global drag exhibits shared characteristics such as exaggerated gender portrayals, parody, and humor, its reception, risks, and effects are molded by local sociopolitical environments. In nations with stringent LGBTQ+ regulations, drag can act as a subtle form of defiance, employing coded performances and satire

to challenge oppressive norms without overt confrontation.

3. Queer Embodiment and Identity

Drag is fundamentally linked to embodiment. The drag performer's body serves as a canvas for political expression, where elements like costume, makeup, voice, and movement are used to challenge gender, sexuality, and societal norms. Scholars suggest that drag artists do more than just mimic gender; they reveal the performative nature of all gendered actions (Butler, 1990). The body acts as a conduit for challenging cultural conventions.

Research also highlights the role of intersectionality in drag. Aspects such as race, class, and nationality shape how performers manage visibility and potential risks. For instance, Black and Latinx drag artists in the United States frequently employ humor and parody to address both racial and sexual oppression at once (Riley, 2016). Conversely, Asian drag performers may incorporate traditional art forms to challenge culturally imposed gender roles while still honoring their heritage.

4. Subversive Humor and Political Protest

Drag humor serves dual purposes: it acts as a shield and a form of challenge. Performers highlight the ridiculousness of strict gender norms by amplifying them, allowing audiences to thoughtfully consider matters of authority, privilege, and oppression. In political arenas, drag has been directly used as a tool for protest:

- **United States:** In reaction to laws targeting the LGBTQ+ community, drag performers have staged marches and shows, using a mix of spectacle

and satire to attract media coverage (Rupp et al., 2010).

- **Europe:** In Poland and Hungary, drag performances serve a dual purpose as protest acts, challenging the increasing anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes. By presenting these as performance art, they sidestep legal repercussions (Koller, 2021).
- **Asia:** In nations such as Thailand and the Philippines, drag performances blend cultural traditions with nuanced political commentary, frequently emphasizing LGBTQ+ rights in a subtle but impactful manner (Jackson, 2018).

Subversive humor operates on various levels: it provides entertainment, encourages action, and challenges prevailing narratives. It enables marginalized groups to express opposition in innovative ways and build resilience in adverse sociopolitical environments.

5. Media Representation and Global Visibility

The influence of media on the development of drag culture is indisputable. Shows like RuPaul's Drag Race have significantly increased the visibility of drag, establishing a worldwide vocabulary of styles, techniques, and humor (LeMaster, 2018). Through social media, performers can connect with audiences far beyond their local areas, promoting global unity while navigating cultural differences.

Nevertheless, the way media portrays drag raises issues about its commercialization and the potential weakening of its political impact. Researchers warn that mainstream media might prioritize entertainment over critical social commentary, favoring specific aesthetics, racialized beauty standards, or commercial appeal (Riley, 2016). This conflict highlights the necessity of examining both

the content of performances and their reception within larger sociopolitical contexts.

6. Gaps in Current Research

Although there is substantial research on drag within Western settings, there is a scarcity of global comparative studies. Only a handful of studies thoroughly investigate the role of drag as a form of political resistance in various cultural and legal environments. Additionally, the connections between queer embodiment, humor, and political activism are frequently analyzed in isolation instead of as linked resistance strategies. This study aims to address these shortcomings by providing a comprehensive, comparative examination of drag culture worldwide.

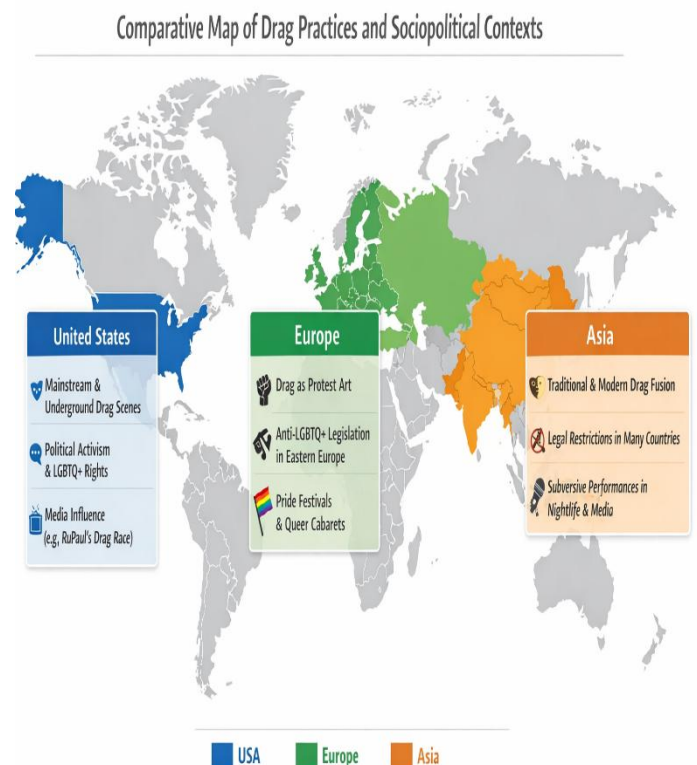


Figure 2: Comparative map of drag practices and sociopolitical contexts (US, Europe, Asia)

Theoretical Framework	Key Concepts	Application in Drag Studies	Representative Studies
Queer Theory	Gender performativity, fluidity, subversion of heteronormativity, identity as socially constructed	Examines how drag performances challenge normative gender roles and reveal the performativity of all gendered behaviors. Highlights intersectionality and queerness in performance.	Butler (1990); Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro (2010); Riley (2016)
Performance Studies	Embodiment, spectacle, audience-performer dynamics, liminality, performative resistance	Analyzes drag as an embodied, theatrical practice. Explores how performances create alternative social meanings and spaces of resistance.	Phelan (1993); Schechner (2002); Jackson (2018)
Humor Studies / Subversive Humor	Satire, parody, ridicule, comedic resistance, social critique	Investigates how drag uses humor to critique societal norms, challenge oppressive structures, and engage audiences in political commentary.	Riley (2016); LeMaster (2018); Koller (2021)
Cultural & Media Studies	Representation, commodification, globalization, transnational media	Explores the impact of mass media, social media, and globalization on drag aesthetics, visibility, and political efficacy.	LeMaster (2018); Rupp et al. (2010)
Intersectionality / Critical Race & Gender Studies	Race, class, sexuality, marginalization, layered identities	Examines how drag intersects with social inequalities, highlighting how different performers navigate visibility, privilege, and oppression.	Riley (2016); Chauncey (1994); Jackson (2018)

Table 2: Key theoretical frameworks applied to drag studies (Queer Theory, Performance Studies, Humor Studies)

Year	Location	Event / Protest	Significance
1969	New York, USA	Stonewall Riots	Drag queens like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera played pivotal roles; drag linked to LGBTQ+ activism and rights movements.
1970s	New York & San Francisco, USA	Formation of LGBTQ+ activist drag groups	Drag performers integrated theatricality into protests, fundraising, and public awareness campaigns.
1980s	San Francisco, USA	Drag participation in ACT UP demonstrations	Combines performance and protest against HIV/AIDS stigma and governmental inaction.
1993	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Queen's Night Drag Parade	Utilized humor and spectacle to protest social exclusion of LGBTQ+ communities.
2010	Warsaw, Poland	Drag protest during anti-LGBTQ+ legislation	Demonstrates subversive drag as a form of civic resistance under restrictive legal regimes.
2012	Budapest, Hungary	Drag performances at Pride marches	Drag employed to contest rising anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and assert visibility despite political risk.
2015	Bangkok, Thailand	Drag performance during human rights advocacy events	Combines traditional performance styles with modern drag aesthetics to promote LGBTQ+ rights.
2018	Manila, Philippines	Drag activism during Pride Month	Highlighted socio-political issues including anti-discrimination policies and gender inclusivity.
2020	Global / Online	Pandemic-era virtual drag protests and shows	Drag adapted to online spaces to continue political commentary and maintain global community solidarity.
2022	Various cities, Europe & US	Drag protests against anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies	Continued global trend of using drag performance as political activism in response to conservative legislative measures.

Table 3: Timeline of notable political drag events and protests worldwide

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