



SPILL THE TEA

Learnings from the
queens on inclusivity.



Written by Marina Gkiza

In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, which in some ways reignited social justice activism, coupled with the achievements of the LGBTQ+ movement inclusion and diversity have been high up on the 2019 agenda.

The media trend of inclusivity has continued to grow in response to these influential sociocultural forces. In the US, GLAAD recently reported significant year on year growth in LGBTQ+ regularly featured characters (8.8% 2018-2019 television season) with increases also seen in LGBTQ+ characters of colour. High profile dramas, such as Ryan Murphy's *Pose* and Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*, are important examples of representation of LGBTQ+ people of colour and transgender people respectively. In the UK, Channel 4's *The Bitch* was also lauded as a nuanced reflection of relationships.

While the sheer visibility of so called minority groups is a huge step forward

in accurately representing the world, representation on screen remains a challenge for broadcasters and streaming services alike. The way in which these voices are represented can feel tokenistic, lacking the depth and humanity needed to cut through and effect change. It can also run the risk of misrepresenting minorities using mistaken outdated stereotypes. Ofcom's 2018 'Representation and portrayal on BBC television' report shows that whilst people feel that TV content is better at representing and portraying a wider mix of people than it used to be, some LGBTQ+ and disabled viewers still have concerns about being presented in one-dimensional, inauthentic, or stereotypical ways.

While not necessarily everyone's cup of tea, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is an important example of inclusion and has been for the last decade. With the UK version of the show having just aired on BBC Three, there are high expectations considering its success in the US. *RuPaul's Drag Race* graduated from a smaller LGBTQ+ focused cable channel

to VH1 and from there has continued to gain cultural – and commercial – significance. From the New York and LA drag conventions (which in 2017 reportedly generated \$8 million in the sale of merchandise), to the virality of the show and its stars online via GIFs and memes, drag culture through *RuPaul's Drag Race* has sashayed into the mainstream.

As cultural analysts, we are fascinated with what makes this show so resonant at this moment in time, and importantly what other lessons in inclusivity broadcasters can learn from it.

Portray unique personal journeys with transcendent values.

While the show is dramatic and flamboyant, if stripped of the drag element we are left with stories of real people taken on a journey of personal development, aspiring to grow while staying true to themselves. The Queens' balancing act of self-love and self-doubt, power and vulnerability strike a chord with viewers from all walks of life

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who can see themselves in the Queens. This is a contemporary example of the classical and popular Bildungsroman genre, in which we follow the characters in their personal development and in the process, we empathise and recognise ourselves in them. While highly competitive, the show's overarching message is grounded in loving yourself and others for who they are. (RuPaul's) Drag Queens give us human realness, transcending race, religion, class, culture and education in a climate of division and polarisation.

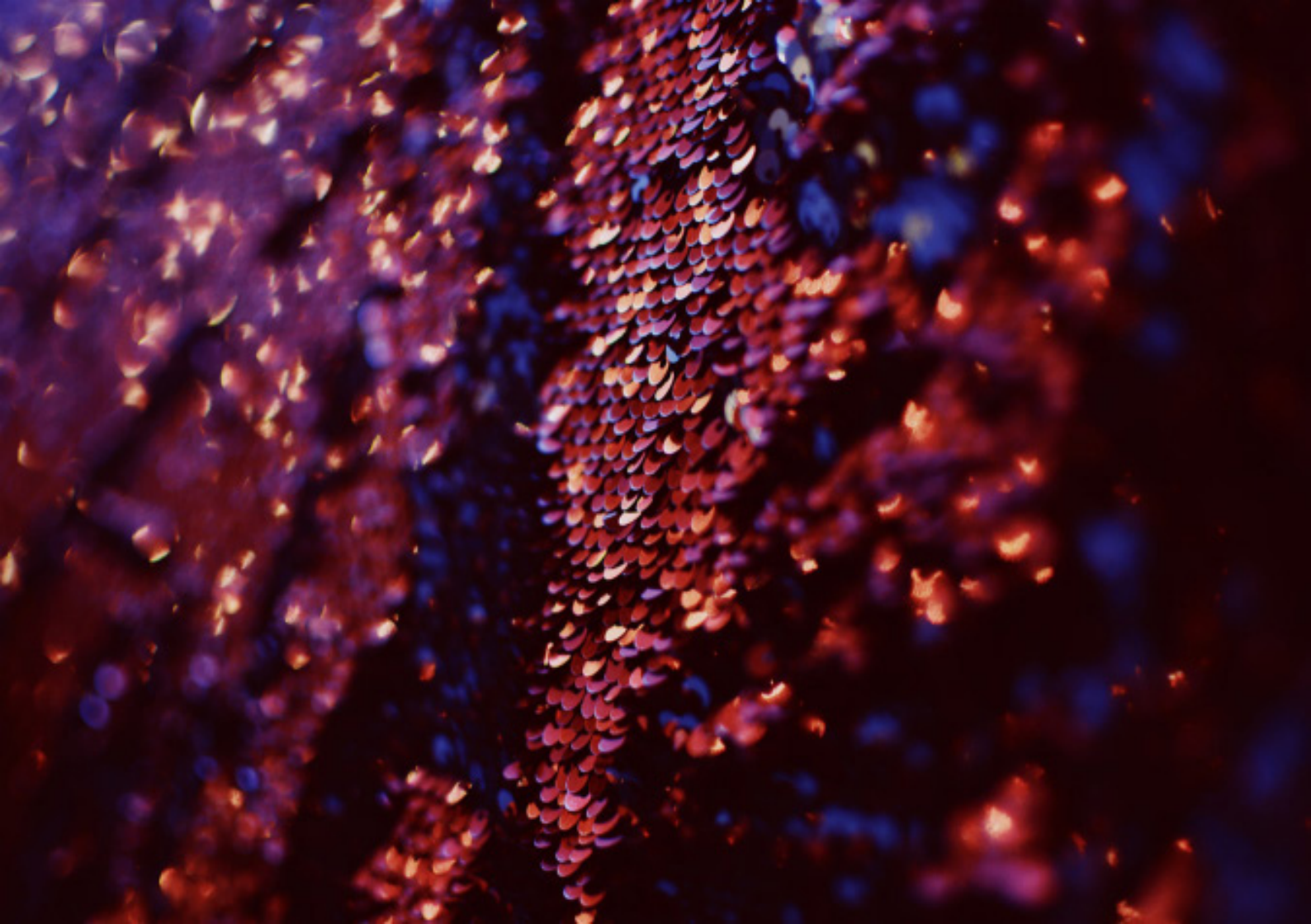
Champion empathy.

Fierce competition lies at the core of the show, but there's more to it. While high performance and perfection are weaved through the programme, viewers can see beyond the mask (or "paint") and be exposed to the Queen's less "royal" sides. Although not always possible, Drag Race tries to allow time to talk through and explore the contestants' shortcomings and conflicts. This trope adds the depth needed to shift perceptions in a spirit

of tolerance and respect to difference. The restrictions of the TV format and Reality TV's obsession with drama do not always accommodate for these stories to unfold and it looks as though the show consciously chooses to focus on empathy and an effort to understand one another. However, the nature of struggles needs to be told authentically by broadcasters, it is vital that represented groups are a core part of the production and marketing teams.

Offer the audience an awakening.

There is value in the show serving as a stepping stone into a diverse world. While a priori inclusive, the show refuses to take itself too seriously and pokes fun at rigidly defined identities that can drive people apart. The art of Drag can use and exaggerate feminine codes which most viewers can easily recognise. The artists' interpretations of feminine (and masculine) can create a space where the familiar meets the novel, allowing the audience to feel more comfortable when facing diversity elsewhere.



Beware of the mainstream gaze.

Content makers need to be extremely careful not to represent diversity with the 'mainstream gaze'. Drag Race works because it is made for and by the community, bringing the mainstream along for the ride. It is vital to avoid the perception of a "freak show" where diversity is presented as something different and odd. Instead, broadcasters should focus on representing the different as an alternative, but equally valid identity.

Ground in cultural relevance.

The success of the UK version of Drag Race will not come from 'copy and pasting' US cultural norms. It needs to show its unique UK twist based on the unique culture of drag that exists here. This drag is grittier and judged on performative goals, with the value of humour outriding the perfectionism seen in the US. Consultancy with those on

the scene is key, content makers who fail the authenticity test will see backlash either in viewer opinion and/or ratings.

The brilliance of RuPaul's Drag Race's inclusivity and humanity can serve as a lesson for media outlets and creative storytellers who wish to include and represent diverse communities as equally valid and complex identities. Capturing this diversity authentically remains important in capturing younger audiences, assumed by many to be the holy grail demographic (particularly when only 66% of Gen Z consider themselves exclusively heterosexual, notably lower than their Millennial and Gen X counterparts).

Drag race is attractive for its authenticity, its drama and surely its heels, sequins and death drops, but broadcasters need to ensure that time is given to those programmes which may be less show-stopping, but equally authentic.

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ABOUT THE TEAM

Marina is a qualitative researcher and works with media and tech brands. She holds an MA in Gender, Media and Culture and has a particular interest in the intersection of media and technology and the way in which popular culture, politics and social norms change and shape people's lives.

Katherine works exclusively with media, technology and youth brands to help them develop and grow. She has an MA in cultural criticism and her particular value is in infusing a deep understanding of the wider socio economic and cultural landscape into the research she undertakes. She currently heads up our Media Development qualitative specialism driving thinking and innovation in this area.



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