

“I Feel Very Attacked!”: RuPaul’s Drag Race Fans’ Perception on Fandom Toxicity

An exploration of fans’ attitudes towards the relationship between reality television’s structured narrative and online hate speech

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ABSTRACT

Due to the evolution of social media and participatory culture, television audiences have been encouraged to constantly engage with media content by contributing opinions and preferences to influence shows. Though the rising format of social television benefited the renowned drag competition show RuPaul's Drag Race, it simultaneously increased the amount of hate speech circulating within the fandom, especially when combined with the notorious "villain edits" the show has been called out for. This phenomenon demands immediate attention as drag queens' mental well-being and career are constantly put at high risk. Despite scholarly efforts dissecting the encoding process of production, and questioning minority representations on the show, there has been a lack of research from the audience perspective. To fill the gap, this research approaches the issue from the lens of the audience by answering the question: "How do RuPaul's Drag Race fans perceive the online toxicity in the fandom". Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 RuPaul's Drag Race fans, the researcher discovers audience insights on the "realness" of the reality television format, classification of different articulations of speech, and the dilemma for the production to prioritize social responsibility or entertainment. The researcher argues that despite obtaining mixed attitudes towards production intervention, all interviewees showcased concern for fellow fans that lack media literacy and television criticism skills. With increasing production manipulation, viewers that fail to differentiate the produced reality and the audiences' situated reality often fall victim to overtly intense emotions and the dangerous urge to seek validation. These feelings often stimulate impulsive and unconsidered messages that are easily disseminated publicly through the help of the Internet, spreading hate and negatively influencing reality television personas' lives. In spite of the emphasis on the viewers' ability to appropriately decode media text, interviewees also acknowledged the difficulty to educate the whole fandom. As a result, solutions for the production to eliminate fandom toxicity while maintaining the entertaining value are suggested, including censoring social platforms, incorporating disclaimers or reconciliation scenes in the show, and proper guidance for the contestants. Contestants are also encouraged to speak up for their fellow drag queens when in need. Additionally, fans' personal definitions of "shade/reads", critiques, and hate speech are provided to help create a safer playground for a healthier discussion.

KEYWORDS: *RuPaul's Drag Race, Reality Television, Online Hate Speech, Participatory Culture, Fandom Toxicity*

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1.0 Introduction

Whether through leaving commentaries under a YouTube video, or creating a thoroughly realized spin-off show, the audiences' extensive engagement with media content continues to increase since the initiation of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Instead of unidirectionally consuming media content produced by large media corporations, the easy access to contribute personal opinions and content provided by social media platforms also created a bilateral participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). As social media extended its original functionality of strengthening personal networks into commercialization and marketing, reality television productions immediately sought to incorporate digital extensions within their plotted storyline, aiming to enhance the emotional investments of the viewers through prompting direct audience engagement (van Es, 2016). Amongst the most popular reality TV shows, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has continuously expanded its fandom and promoted drag into the mainstream since its debut in 2009, and undoubtedly redefined the qualifications of being a "hit" television show through the utilization of social media (Gudelunas, 2017). Despite receiving comparatively low Nielsen ratings during its season eight premiere due to the emergence of streaming services, *RuPaul's Drag Race's* Twitter engagements rate were three times higher than the average industry standard, sitting at a dazzling 18-19% (Gudelunas, 2017).

However, though social platforms provide *RuPaul's Drag Race* viewers direct access to interact with the reality television personas and bond with other audiences by exchanging opinions online, toxicity and hostility unavoidably surfaced as by-products of the discussion space without clear limitations. Despite representing progressive social values such as gender fluidity and racial equality, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has simultaneously attracted toxic fans who often disseminate hostility and aggression towards specific contestants. A recent example can be found with Brita Filter, the season 12 contender who deactivated her social media account and later confessed to having suicidal thoughts after receiving constant abuse and death threats from viewers due to her shady behavior towards fellow drag queen Aiden Zhane (Damshenas, 2020). Season 13 contestant Kandy Muse also received an enormous amount of hate following her iconic feud with fellow contestant Tamisha Iman in the aftershow *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*. More similar incidents can be identified throughout the history of the show, yet as social media continues to evolve the frequency increases, thus demanding immediate attention.

Ironically, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has historically been called out for giving “villain edits” to specific queens every season to spice up the show. As a competition reality television show, it also follows certain genre conventions of reality television, such as situating contestants in extremely exaggerated circumstances to attract viewers with compelling narratives (Penzhorn and Pitout, 2007). However, the charm of unfiltered drama prompts online bullying, leading invested fans to participate in the toxic discourse and cancel culture. Additionally, despite reality television having never been upheld to the same standards as documentaries regarding social responsibilities, *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a show that values self-love and minority representation stumbles to lead by example when it comes to the constant neglect of contestants' mental well-being. By disregarding bullied contestants and the fandom's toxic behavior, the production allows the inner divergence of the queer community to continue to increase, only for the sake of not offending viewers for commercial reasons. Regarding minority representations, Proctor and Kies (2018) pointed out that recent tensions within pop culture fandoms often relates to the movement towards inclusive representation, making certain groups of privileged individuals feel threatened and disempowered. This fear prompts them to utilize social media platforms to voice discontent in the attempt to reverse the status loss (Proctor and Kies, 2018). For *RuPaul's Drag Race* to use reality television shows' notorious name of “trashy entertainment” as an excuse to wrongfully treat their participants is extremely dangerous considering the narrow distance between the audience and the television persona compared to fictional drama (Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

Though researchers have attempted to identify online hate speech towards drag queens to protect their well-being, no research has explored the fans' perception of the fandom toxicity, and their opinion on viewers taking the television production's bait (Olivia et al., 2020). Considering the “reading/shade” culture of drag and the critiquing element of the competition show, the already ambiguous definition of hate speech enters an even grayer area where viewers and contestants fail to identify the fine line when expressing their opinions. In the era where audience engagement and personal speculations are highly encouraged through social platforms, the lack of proper guidance and regulations can only hamper the progress of open communications, especially for a show that aims to start conversations for underrepresented communities and controversial social issues.

To understand the online hate speech from its root and provide an answer to the dilemma between creating compelling television and stimulating toxic behaviours towards contestants, this research aims to answer “How do *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans perceive the

online toxicity in the fandom”. Through examining fans’ personal definition of online toxicity and hate speech, the findings can also provide precise comprehension of different articulations of speech, thus constructing a safer online space for discussion. To scaffold to the main research question, sub questions such as “to what extent does structured narrative correlate with toxic fan behaviors”, and “how do *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fans perceive the hate-prompting edit from the television production” are also answered by exploring fans’ perception of the production’s, contestants’, and viewers’ respective responsibility regarding stimulating hate speech. Lastly, potential solutions to the fandom toxicity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* are provided.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

Despite being a unique and distinctive show that has continuously rewritten the definition of successful television through increasing audience participation, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is still constructed on certain genre traditions and benefits from the evolution of social media. Therefore, to thoroughly understand the toxicity circulating in the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom, the researcher first covers the genre convention of reality television. Through dissecting the genre, the researcher explains how producers create an alternative reality opposed to the reality viewers perceive from the show. This brings us to the audience studies, media literacy, and the participatory culture of social media, indicating why the researcher chose to understand the online hate speech from the fans' perspective. Lastly, the researcher explores the ambiguity of online hate speech, and wraps up by pointing out the specialness of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom.

2.1 Genre Convention of Reality Television

Through a critical-historical genre analysis on reality television, Penzhorn and Pitout (2007) identified ordinary people as actors in an imprisoned environment, voyeurism, audience participation, and simulation of real life as four key conventions for the ambiguous television format. As Cummings (2002) explained, to stimulate exaggerated reactions from the contestants for the viewers to enjoy the show, reality television production often intervenes the "reality" and forces conflict amongst the participants. The way participants deal with these extreme disputes influences their popularity amongst the fans, which determines the amount of praise or hate they receive. As for voyeurism, when provided a seemingly safe perspective to spy on the indiscreet lives of other people, viewers are challenged to reflect upon themselves for the reaction they might have in similar circumstances (Calvert, 2000). This idea of television personas and viewers existing in a common universe encourages audience participation, as active involvement of viewers further strengthens the emotional bond between them and the contestants (Penzhorn and Pitout, 2007). As viewers share their expectations and experiences whilst interacting with the show, they simultaneously create a relationship with other audiences, generating social interactions and ultimately forming a fandom that shares common interests (Foster, 2004). Interestingly, despite recognizing that reality television is ultimately fake and scripted, viewers' reactions are often intense and personal. The reflection is established on viewers' desire to search for the authenticity when real contestants are showing their true self in an

unreal circumstance, juggling between the tension of performance and authenticity (Hill, 2002).

The combination of factual information and entertainment values prompted Hill (2002) to classify reality television as a post-documentary genre. Shifting from documentary concerning social issues to reality television emphasizing on private concerns deprives the ability for produced sensation to serve public purpose or create political connection (Nichols, 1995). This is not to neglect the ability for banal observations of individuals to represent political relations, as the examination of personal life unveils the relationship between the private and the public (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). However, the sentiment stimulated by melodramatic moments of reality television is therefore stripped down to only focus on social morality. The crucial difference between utilizing melodrama and reality television to reaffirm social ethics is that the former slanders fictional characters, while the latter denigrates non-fictional contestants (Brooks, 1996). As a result, the immoral villains of reality television are often directly condemned, despite serving as the agent to provoke the audiences' sentiment and convey certain social morality.

Another characteristic that heavily challenges the rightfulness of reality television is undoubtedly the economic possibilities of the genre (Moran, 2005). Compared to other television genres, reality television allows the production to attract a vast audience with lower production cost (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). On a micro level, the comparably inexpensive expense of recruiting "ordinary people to perform their own self-awareness, self-work and ultimately self-transformation" can be problematically inciteful (Skeggs and Wood, 2012, p.4). On a macro level, the commercial benefits of producing reality television can threaten the space for traditional documentaries (Hill, 2007). Rather than informing citizens with genuine representation of the world, the factual entertainment genre increasingly pressures programmers to produce the real, limiting itself from exploring critical social issues, while discrediting the factual element with created fakeness.

2.2 Constructed Reality and The Realness of Drag: Intervention and Representation

As a consequence of its genre convention, the debate of whether reality television is truly authentic, or rather authentic enough, continues to spiral. To decide whether reality television is suitably genuine, the concept of the real and reality requires clear definition, especially considering the constant usage of the word "realness" in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Though Merriam-Webster redirects its users to "real" if one searches for "realness", the term

has a completely opposite definition in ballroom culture, the culture that *RuPaul's Drag Race* heavily borrowed inspiration from. According to the renowned documentary *Paris is Burning*, to achieve realness is to successfully erase the flaws that are generally not accepted by the society, and blend into hegemonic values with the perfect drag illusion (Livingston, 1991). This interpretation of realness creates a gap between the realness of individual contestants and the reality they are inserted in, providing radical potential for reconsidering the constitution of reality. Examining reality through the lens of realness indicates that the reality of being a certain character or persona is often reduced in public spaces (in this case, national television) to visibly identifiable marks, such as mannerisms and fashion (Ward, 2020). Such a superficial level of reality is therefore dangerously vulnerable to interventions, as a simple edit from the producer can easily rewrite the realness of each contestant.

Intervening with deceiving or over-dramatic edits is extremely alluring for the reality television producers for two reasons. Firstly, as Van Es (2016) pointed out, despite the rising popularity of social television, where traditional reality television attempts to incorporate audiences' participation to make the viewing experience more real, the producers still acknowledge the necessity to compose fascinating narratives to boost attraction and viewership. Such practice is especially necessary for the showrunners when the contestants are increasingly aware of political correctness, resulting in them trying to avoid drama for criticism. Another underlying force for intervention is the fact that reality television participants have become an occupation where people get paid to perform themselves (Jost, 2010). To earn the check and the opportunity to self-brand themselves in publicity, reality television contestants are often forced to sign contracts that allow full authority to the production team in manipulating their story, whether on or off stage (Collins, 2008). Both factors expose contestants to certain edits that serve the production, potentially contradicting their will on how they would rather prefer to represent themselves or their community.

Representation of minority groups, whether of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, is nothing new to mainstream broadcasting (Pullen, 2007). However, conversations surrounding minority portrayal are especially heated when regarding reality television, as participants agree to present their true self in situations designed by the producers to prompt exaggerated conversations or interaction, promising contradicting depictions of reality and facade (Orbe, 2008). According to Dreyer (2011), competitive reality television also represents a small society with dynamic political relationships. It is crucial to carefully evaluate the value and ideology a television show conveys, as television has progressed from portraying cultural identities to creating identities for monetary gain (Turner, 2010). The

ability to create its own ideological system contrasting the hegemonic interest of states is especially prominent regarding *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as the subject matter of the show continuously circulates around gender issues, sexuality identification, and racial discrimination, constantly resisting societal norms.

What could be problematic for *RuPaul's Drag Race* is its neglect and ignorance from using its power and unique platform to correct the wrong in the outside reality. For the producers to create a bubble and use it as an excuse to disregard social responsibility seems almost too hypocritical for a show that preaches equality and love. By choosing to not disturb white supremacy, patriarchy, or heteronormativity through portraying black contestants as angry villains, or giving the reasoning voice to contestants when they are out of drag (their male-selves), the producers are able to maintain and satisfy the significant amount of white heteronormative audiences it attracts (Ward, 2020). Attempting to resist certain ideologies while complying to others for profit showcases that the commercial pressure of reality television hinders the genre to thoroughly engage in serious conversations. Though the ideological system *RuPaul's Drag Race* created to set every contestant in the same starting point might seem reasonable as a competition show, it ultimately neglected the fact that the audience perceives the show within the outside reality, often influenced by deeply embedded discrimination.

2.3 Audience Studies

Traditionally, media influence came first, followed by viewer power (Bratich, 2006). However, the ultimate truth is that the media relies on its viewers. The way the audience interprets the message is critical in determining what the producers ultimately wish to reveal. Therefore, the concept of the audience changed from a passive spectator to someone who can bargain for what they consume actively. As a result, in order to discover the stemming point of the fandom toxicity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and subsequently dissect how viewers' preferences influence the production, the researcher aims to answer the question from the audiences' perspective instead of the producers'.

Despite increasing audience participation, few scholars have explored the meaning-making process of reality television audiences regarding excessive drama. Since the decoding process of media text is heavily influenced by audiences' personal background, unfamiliarities with cultural context that supports the produced content might lead to dangerous misconceptions without proper audience research (Ross, 1996). To accurately

understand how messages media producers attempt to convey are perceived by *RuPaul's Drag Race* viewers, it is essential to approach the topic through the audiences' perspective.

Additionally, considering Hall's (2002) concept of how audiences can decode the media text differently compared to the initial idea encoded by producers, it is essential to understand how *RuPaul's Drag Race* viewers perceive the narrative to figure out why online hate speech is produced. Hall's (2002) encoding/decoding model of communication disagrees with the traditional model of regarding the media text sender and the receiver as a direct linear relation. Instead, Hall (2002) proposed a four stage process that sequentially includes production, circulation, use, and reproduction. The first stage, production, involves the construction of the media text, where producers take a variety of factors such as professional ideologies and assumption of audience into account to convey tailored ideas (Hall, 2002). This is followed by circulation and use, where producers program the media text as meaningful discourse after constant feedback in the producing process (Hall, 2002). Lastly, the active receivers reproduce the media text immediately after interpreting the message in the framework of their personal belief and culture, generating emotions and opinions that lead to behavioral consequences (Hall, 2002). By applying Hall's (2002) model, the researcher can not only identify whether the viewers interpret the show according to the production's assumption, but also analyze the fans' perception of fellow fans' online comments.

Hall (2002) also suggested three positions for the audience to decode the presented message, namely the dominant/hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. Considering the target of the research to be fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the researcher assumes them to be either in the dominant position or the negotiated position to be able to enjoy the show whole-heartedly. Aside from the subject matter, the researcher aims to identify whether fans accept the authenticity of the reality show directly, or situate themselves in the negotiated position, questioning certain text while accepting the dominant message. This negotiation would be especially interesting in regards to identifying the difference between the produced reality of the show and the situated reality of the viewers.

Through encouraging audiences to serve as a virtual judge, *RuPaul's Drag Race* invites fans to become more than a consumer, but also commentators or collaborators that raise problems and criticisms about program content, or increase a program's dynamism and the proximity with the television professionals (García-Avilés, 2012). Extensive audience engagement blurred boundaries between the reality of the show and the reality that the audience lives in. This ambiguous relation exemplifies Bratich's (2007) idea that the viewer

is invited to integrate their viewing experience with their daily life. Contrary to the escapism that fictional drama viewers experience, reality television viewers often confront the idea of “incapism”, and constantly reminded of the imprisonment of their daily routine (Bratich, 2007). As a result, audiences tend to judge the participants upon whether or not they are truly authentic (Hill, 2007). The viewers on one hand consider the villains as fictional characters to be assessed and criticized, and on the other hand regard the protagonists as real individuals that represent the audience (Kilborn, 2003). This double diction of perceiving reality television heightens the emotional attachments of the viewers and creates a rather dangerously narrow critical distance (Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

2.4 Media Literacy and Television Criticism

According to Livingstone (2004), media literacy is “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (p.2). Without media literacy, the public will become merely receivers of online information deprived of the power to participate and reproduce (Livingstone, 2004). In regards to the research, fans’ media literacy skill could vastly influence the way they perceive the show, and affect the means of reproducing personal opinions (Livingstone, 2004). Livingstone (2004) suggested four means to promote and assess the public awareness of media literacy, including education, public understanding of science, print literacy, and health promotion.

Taking a step further, Vande Berg et al. (2004, p.221) proposed that when media literacy is understood as media criticism, it becomes a stronger idea, “specially in its commitment to generating reasoned critical engagement by citizens immersed in a mass-mediated public sphere.” Additionally, Vande Berg et al. (2004) emphasized the importance of television criticism, claiming that obtaining the ability to create critical interpretations of media text shifts viewers’ perceptions of the television industry as they become aware of the different ways in which the television industry produces content. Television criticism also allows viewers to critically dissect the subtleties of the media text and transform the findings into overt cultural values or even political perspectives (Vande Berg et al., 2004). Amongst the three main varieties of television criticism, the audience-centered television criticism is the most useful approach for reality television viewers to practice since it considers how production utilizes editing and storytelling to create ideal audience positions (Vande Berg et al., 2004). Combined with Hall’s (2002) classification of audience position, the fans will be

able to reflect on their own viewing habits, and further decode hidden texts not overtly shown by the television production.

2.5 Social Media and Platforms as Participatory Culture

As the 21st century reality television sensation, *RuPaul's Drag Race* garnered a huge fan base throughout its 11-year and ongoing airing. This massive fandom constructed upon *RuPaul's Drag Race's* unconventional approach of interacting with digital media demanded scholars' immediate attention, as the progressive-labeled competition show reaches out to a broad audience. Gudelunas (2017) explored how *RuPaul's Drag Race* redefined "successful television program" not merely by indicating the shift from traditional television viewing towards streaming services, but also declaring the significance of social media engagement through its leading numbers according to industry standards with measured interactions.

Contrary to the generic Web 2.0 infrastructure when it was first established, social media platforms have converted from all-purpose devices into linear applied services, tailoring to their users' needs (Dijck, 2013). Since launching in 2006, Twitter has positioned itself as a network that helps users to connect, follow, and initiate conversations. The trending topics function debuted in 2008 allows users to actively trend certain topics or passively track topics with the assistance of hashtags (Dijck, 2013). This feature alongside tagging and retweeting, granted the mass of young active users who feel empowered by the social media platforms the power to contribute to public conversations regarding social issues with their personal opinions (Dijck, 2013). The questionable entitlement of viewers to criticize unlikable contestants on Twitter is a reflection of the culture Twitter has established. Considering the toxic fandom and online hate speech as a power negotiation between fans, contestants, and television production, it is important to note that most social platforms are not neutral with the constantly tuned filtering functions (Huberman et al., 2009). Another example can be identified on Reddit, one of the most popular English-language online forums. Due to its lack of moderation and censorship for offensive language, it obtains a notorious reputation for hosting some of the most extreme opinions of alt-right groups (Topinka, 2018). Nonetheless, all above is not to discredit any social platform, but to point out the characteristics that could potentially contribute to online hate speech. According to Darwin (2017) and Foeken and Roberts (2019), if used correctly, Reddit provides nonbinary people spaces to discuss about gender identity, and lesbians to negotiate different identities within their community.

2.6 Online Hate Speech

The increasing power granted to fans soon proves itself to become a double-edged sword, as heartwarming compliments and creative reproduction originated from the fandom, toxicity and hatred spurred as devious by-products. To accurately discover the effect of online hate speech on *RuPaul's Drag Race's* production narrative, the researcher adopted the definition of “toxic” by Proctor et al. (2018), and the definition of “hate speech” by Assimakopoulos et al. (2017). The former indicates that “toxicity is hostility and aggression – getting in people’s faces, anonymous (or non-anonymous) harassment, naming and shaming (like block lists), etc” (Proctor et al., 2018, p. 371). Hate speech, according to the latter, is a vocal expression of hatred directed against people based on protected characteristics such as age, gender, or race, potentially leading to discrimination (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017).

Considering the intensive social media engagement *RuPaul's Drag Race* has stimulated, it is important to also acknowledge the distinct characteristic of online hate speech in comparison to offline hate speech. Contrasting the assumption that anonymity could be the major reason for Web users to contribute to online hate speech, Brown (2018) indicated that the instantaneous and spontaneity nature of communication on the Internet might be the more influential elements that have been overlooked. Due to how the Internet fosters instant response through its easy access and no geographical limit, users are often quick to express their heated emotions, impulsive judgement, and unfiltered opinions before logical consideration (Brown, 2018). The danger of spontaneity is amplified on social platforms and online forums such as Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, where users are free to comment and engage in conversations with other opinionated viewers. According to Coffey and Woolworth (2004), this back and forth exchange of unconsidered opinions often leads to an escalation of online hate.

In search for a solution to fight against hate speech towards the LGBTQ+ community, Olivia et al. (2020) specifically researched on the development of artificial intelligence in content moderation for combating hate speech targeted at drag queens. Interestingly, due to the fact that AI tools are mostly trained to analyze text-based content, they are incapable of understanding context (Olivia et al., 2020). As a result, LGBTQ+ terms are often associated with toxicity indirectly not because of its inherent hatred, but rather due to the negative text they are often correlated with, appearing side by side with swear words and hurtful messages (Olivia et al., 2020). The inability for the AI to more accurately identify hate speech against drag queens therefore lies in the embedded heterosexism and cisgenderism in the society.

This suggests that the toxicity LGBTQ+ terms are accused of stems from the same hierarchical structure that puts the LGBTQ+ community at an exposed and defenseless position.

Another phenomenon of excessive audience engagement of *RuPaul's Drag Race* includes the involvement of the cancel culture, a term deemed by Ng (2020, p. 1) to indicate a digital practice “being initially embraced as empowering to being denounced as emblematic of digital ills.” Although both cancel culture and online hate speech convey negative messages towards the recipients, it is important to differentiate the cause of the action. For the former, the cancelling phenomena are often large-scale reactions to controversial actions of the target. The negative attitude towards the recipient therefore can be deemed as empowering the victims of the problematic activity or even encouraging historically oppressed communities that are related to the issue (Ng, 2020). For the latter, hate speech stems from unreasonable toxicity and discrimination towards certain communities of race, religion, gender, or sexuality. The major difference lies in whether the target should be held accountable and condemned for unlawful or ethically problematic acts. Nonetheless, the two terms undoubtedly share similarities and are only separated by an ambiguous line. Therefore, despite the research focusing on online hate speech circulating the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom, the cancel culture, in the most recent case the cancelling of Sherry Pie, is also taken into account.

2.7 Reality Television Fandom in the Digital Era

According to Gruzd et al. (2011), the requirements for creating a virtual community include a sense of belonging, the ability to wield significant power, and mutual emotional bonds. The evolution of social media and online forums have provided reality television fans with access to the Internet a platform to fulfill the desire to interact with others, contribute and consume a wide variety of opinions and reproductions. One of the most prominent distinctions of reality television fandom compared to other media fandoms is that the former is directly connected to non-fictional reality television celebrities instead of fictional characters. Added on top of that, the pervasiveness of social media apps and the phenomenon of genuine online self-promotion causes ordinary people to feel a sense of privilege and familiarity with the private lives of strangers (Porter, 2015). As a result, reality television fans often feel entitled to address and discuss celebrities as if they know them personally (Stefanone et al., 2010). The digital revolution in this case not only blurred the line between

the viewers and the producers, but also narrowed down the critical distance between fans and celebrities, potentially resulting in inappropriate engagement and interactions (Pearson, 2010).

Considering the economic aspect of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and how drag queens generate revenue for themselves, the fandom of the show shares a more direct connection to the contestants (Ward, 2020). Despite one of the genre conventions of reality television being recruiting ordinary people, many drag queens obtain a fan base before joining the show. Aside from being a reality television show, *RuPaul's Drag Race* therefore also serves as a promoting platform for the contestants. Ru girls often go on tour after the airing of their season, and continue to earn a vast majority of their income through selling merchandise, club performances, or event hosting (Ward, 2020). Being economically reliant on the fandom disturbs the power relationship between the drag queens and the fans, giving the viewers more negotiating power than other reality television fandoms.

3.0 Methodology

To discover how *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans perceive the toxicity within the fandom, the study focuses on utilizing qualitative research, as it gives a more comprehensive point of view with respect to meaning-making and its portrayal, accepting various approaches of deciphering the world (Boeije, 2010). Additionally, since the research aims to understand fans' in-depth individual opinion instead of generalizing superficial thoughts, qualitative research is more suitable in answering the question as it uses "language to understand concepts based on people's experiences, [and] attempts to create a sense of the larger realm of human relationships" (Brennen, 2017, p. 10).

3.1 Interviews

The researcher conducted 60-minute-long in-depth interviews with 10 *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans to truly understand the viewers' perception of fandom toxicity. Through interviews, the researcher is able to understand emotions and the different perspectives people have on issues such as hate speech that would rather not show through content analysis (Johnson, 2011). Johnson (2011) argues that once the interviewees feel comfortable to share his/her honest thoughts, interviewers can more easily collect personal knowledge and ideologies.

Additionally, due to the ongoing evolution of fandom toxicity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, conducting in-depth interviews is more efficient compared to conducting surveys since the former provides the opportunity to approach issues regarding attitude and feelings fresh, stimulating the detailed accounts the researcher aims to discover (Legard et al., 2003). The probing technique of in-depth interviews also allows the researcher to saturate and fully understand a participant's perspective, leaving nothing unexplored (Legard et al., 2003).

Former reality television research that used in-depth interviews as a research method includes Jermyn's (2004) research on the affective power of *Crimewatch UK*. Although Jermyn's interviews were conducted with the producers and directors of *Crimewatch UK* to understand their perspective on creating criminal appeal through utilizing surveillance and editing, the research showcases how in-depth interviews can help discover how people perceive the ambiguous boundary of different realities reality television creates. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that in-depth interviews heavily rely on the ability of self-reflection of the interviewees. Through the research on research methods with reality television viewers, Skeggs et al. (2008) discovered that some interviewees fail to offer a contextualized

reason for watching certain shows due to the lack of access to resources and capital that are based on protected characteristics that are necessary for self-reflexivity. Therefore, to extract rich and insightful perception on *RuPaul's Drag Race's* fandom toxicity, the researcher keeps the interviewee's personal background in mind while conducting interviews. These interviews unveil the reasons behind fans leaving hostile messages, how other fans experience the toxicity built up within the community, and the fans' perception of the structured narrative or "villain edit" of the show.

3.2 Operationalization

The interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured topic list with open-ended questions. These open-ended questions allow interviewees to freely express their opinion and elaborate on topics they find more important. However, to accurately answer the research question, the researcher followed a firm list of questions to stimulate critical responses towards the same issues, while combining flexibility with structure.

The interview guide consists of four main sections (Appendix A). In the first section, the interviewees were requested to express their general opinion on *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a competition reality television. This section was tied to the genre convention of reality television, discovering the core values and featured highlights of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the eye of the fans. The researcher investigated which element of reality television identified by Penzhorn and Pitout (2007) is the most important and appealing to the interviewees, and how *RuPaul's Drag Race* stands out from other reality television shows for them as fans. Bratich (2007) and Hill's (2007) idea of the audience being more emotionally attached to reality television contestants is also verified in this section by questioning the interviewees whether or not reality television imposes more opportunities for self-reflection for the audience compared to fictional drama series. Lastly, to connect the genre convention with the discussion of online hate speech, the researcher introduced Hill's (2002) definition of reality television as post-documentary, and questioned whether reality television producers hold the same social responsibility as documentary directors.

Following up, the second section touched on the structured narrative and villain edit that creates compelling television. A video prompt (*RuPaul's Drag Race Untucked S10E3*) was shown to the interviewees to exemplify how the audiences' perception of the contestants could be vastly altered with simple edits. Through the clip of the fight between The Vixen and Aquaria, the researcher introduced Ward's (2020) accusation of *RuPaul's Drag Race*

presenting a certain reality to please white heteronormative audiences, questioning the interviewees' opinion on the extent of realness of reality television, and how their viewing experience changed after noticing the editing. The researcher also challenged the interviewees of their ultimate preference over compelling narrative or fair competition. Van Es' (2016) idea of participation dilemma helps explain the difficulty of obtaining both elements at once. The interviewees were questioned whether they have prior knowledge of contestants calling out unfair edits, and requested to share their opinions regarding whether exploiting the contestants through editing is justifiable.

The third section focused on the online hate speech circulating in the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom. A video prompt (RuPaul's Drag Race S9E13) was shown to the interviewees to exemplify how past contestants have indicated or complained about production manipulating certain footage to create drama. Since there is still no universally accepted definition of hate speech, interviewees were asked to identify the deciding elements of whether an opinion should be considered hate speech to fans regarding Twitter commentaries and YouTube commentaries. To discover whether Brown's (2018) emphasis on the instantaneous and spontaneous nature of online communication (instead of anonymity) is the deciding factor of hate speech, the interviewees were asked to share their experience on how they cope and express their frustration towards certain contestants or judging outcomes of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Furthermore, in response to Olivia et al.'s (2020) effort of creating an AI to censor online hate speech for drag queens, the researcher questioned the interviewees' opinion on social media censoring, using the example of Twitter banning Donald Trump to lead the discussion of the dilemma between freedom of speech and online hate speech.

Lastly, the fourth section combined the first three sections, questioning whether television production should be blamed on creating dramas that stimulate fandom toxicity. A video prompt (RuPaul's Drag Race Untucked S13E5) and an Instagram post from World of Wonder were shown to indicate the case of production calling out toxic fans after presenting a dramatic fight. The contradiction between creating compelling television and potentially damaging contestants for television production was the main discussion of this section, as interviewees were asked to share their thoughts on this dilemma. From the production perspective, the researcher investigated whether interviewees deem producers responsible for the toxic comments drag queens have received, as the producers are in charge of the representation of the contestants through intervention. From the contestants point of view, interviewees were questioned whether they think drag queens should be responsible for the hate speech they receive, as they voluntarily signed up to become reality television

participants as an occupation that are attached to exploitable contracts and public judgment (Jost, 2010).

After the interviews, all audio recorded was transcribed. The researcher utilized transcribing software Otter.ai for initial assistance, and proofread the transcript with the recording again to make final changes manually.

3.3 Data Collection

To discover the perception of fandom toxicity of RPRD fans, the researcher searched for viewers that are/were thoroughly indulged in the reality television franchise and possess sufficient knowledge of the conversation regarding hate speech within the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom. For a viewer to qualify as a fan, the interviewees were asked whether they have watched the show for at least two years and in total above five seasons prior to finalizing the recruitment. Additionally, considering most of the hate speech drag queens received is via the Internet, the researcher focused on recruiting interviewees between the age of 18 to 40, as research has shown that people between the ages of 20 to 40 are the most frequent users of the Web for entertainment and hedonic purposes (Calvo-Porrall and Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019). Other than sufficient engagement with the show and age, there were no other limitations when it comes to the target group.

The researcher recruited interviewees through his personal Instagram page (with 505 followers), posting slides on Instagram stories to ask for RuPaul's Drag Race "superfans" that meet the above mentioned requirement to participate in a one hour in-depth interview. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the researcher prioritized convenience sampling, as it is inexpensive, easy, and accessible (Etikan, 2016). Considering the sensitivity and depth of the topic, the researcher also chose to apply such sampling method due to its offering of rich qualitative information that stems from the intimate relationship already established between the interviewer and interviewees (Johnson, 2011). Recruiting interviewees from the researcher's social group promise a certain level of depth in the results as the participants' personal background heavily influence their ability to self-reflect on reality television (Skeggs et al., 2008). Additionally, out of the 10 interviewees, three interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling. They were introduced by two respective participating interviewees. However, the researcher acknowledges that locating interviewees via posting recruitments on personal social media channels) does not yield representative outcomes, and the non-probability strategy is inadequate for defining subgroup differences (Boeije, 2010). To

acknowledge the method’s disadvantage of yielding a biased result, the researcher explains how the sample differs from one chosen at random and identifies potential subjects that are omitted or overrepresented from the selection process in the conclusion section. These drawbacks are also taken into account during the research process as the researcher investigates how fans perceive the hostility within the fandom variously.

As a result of the difficulties of conducting face-to-face interviews during a pandemic, the interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The researcher and interviewees were able to communicate synchronously using the complimentary web camera, despite the inability for both parties to have the conversation in physical co-presence (Opdenakker, 2006). Before the online meeting, the researcher distributed consent forms to the interviewees to ask for their consent to be audiotaped during the interview, and whether or not they prefer their identity to be revealed in all written data. At the start of each interview, the researcher reintroduced the purpose of the meeting, and informed the participants of their rights to refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any point.

The average age of the interviewees at the time of the interviews (2021) was 26, ranging from 21 to 36. Only three interviewees were not from Europe, respectively from the United States, Armenia, and Panama, but two of them reside in Europe now. The researcher acknowledges that most of the interviewees reside in Europe, and could therefore perceive the fandom toxicity differently compared to American *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fans, as the latter is more connected with the contestants and production geographically. Regarding the gender and sexuality of the participants, three interviewees identified as homosexual male, two as bisexual male, one as bisexual female, three as heterosexual female, and one participant identified as bisexual non-binary. The composition of the interviewees’ gender identity could be a reflection of the general audience composition of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, but considering the small sample size of the research, the correlation made in the result section is not necessarily representative.

	Age	Occupation	Gender/ Sexuality	Viewing Duration	Nationality
Interviewee 1	24	Political Advisor	Male/Gay	9 years	Dutch
Interviewee 2	36	climbing wall manager	Male/Gay	4 years	British

Interviewee 3	25	Master Student	Female/Bisexual	6 years	Dutch
Interviewee 4	27	PhD Student	Non-binary/Bisexual	4 years	British
Interviewee 5	22	Master Student	Male/Bisexual	2 years	Dutch
Interviewee 6	24	Master Student	Female/Straight	3 years	Dutch
Interviewee 7	26	Marketing Associate	Female/Straight	4 years	Panamanian
Interviewee 8	22	Bachelor Student/ YouTube content creator	Male/Bisexual	7 years	Serbian
Interviewee 9	34	climbing wall teacher	Female/NA	11 years	American
Interviewee 10	21	Bachelor Student	Male/Gay	5 years	Armenian

As for the prompting clips of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* episode, the researcher selected three iconic disputes amongst the *Drag Race* “herstory” that perfectly match the subject matter of each interview section. The video clips not only help refresh the memories of the interviewees and introduce them to the topic, but also build rapport by establishing a common ground of enjoying the same show together (Johnson, 2011). All episodes are available on WOWPresents Plus with easy access.

3.4 Data Analysis

After the interview, the researcher conducted thematic analysis on the interview transcripts to examine the perspectives of different participants and generate unexpected insights through highlighting the similarities and differences between them (King, 2004). Compared to content analysis, thematic analysis is superior in exploring patterns across

qualitative data, identifying overarching themes. Considering the in-depth interviews are conducted through a semi-structured topic list, thematic analysis will better help the researcher identify and connect dimensions and perspectives from different interviewees of respective issues. The systematic aspect of content analysis could also be achieved by thematic analysis, while still allowing the researcher to merge the analysis within their specific context (Joffe and Yardley, 2004).

The researcher started by thoroughly reading through and jotting down notes on interest while transcribing. This was followed by creating a preliminary coding frame based on insightful features of the first transcript. Through grouping up different codes, the researcher came up with central themes of the interviewees' respective perception on fandom toxicity by segmenting and reassembling the data into appropriate categories (Boeije, 2010). With the initial coding frame, the researcher searched for patterns and themes across the different interviews that matched with the frame, while simultaneously reviewing and adjusting the coding themes with new ideas. Once every transcript was coded, the researcher related the analysis result to the research question and literature, pulling out insightful quotes from the interviews to provide compelling examples.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Since the researcher conducted an inductive thematic analysis, in order to increase the reliability of the research, the coding categories used to analyze the transcripts were applied consistently each time (Silverman, 2011). For the themes to be adjusted throughout the analysis, the researcher revisited the analyzed transcript and recode any affected text. In regards to the interviews, the researcher ran a pre-test with a friend to confirm the questions were understandable and clear. The reliability was also enhanced by the transparency of the research design and theoretical framework (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006).

As for validity, although the researcher practiced a non-probability sampling method, as long as the findings of each sample were constantly compared and the data treatment was comprehensive, the research result could still be valid (Silverman, 2011). Additionally, with appropriate tabulations, the researcher was allowed to check if the final result was being brought up more by the interviewee, semi-quantifying the qualitative research (Silverman, 2011). Lastly, once the result was finalized, the researcher reached out to interviewees to confirm whether or not the findings match their opinions, reaching respondent validation

(Silverman, 2011).

4.0 Results and Discussion

To accurately understand the interviewees' perception on the fandom toxicity, the results will be presented in three main sections. The first section discusses respondents' understanding of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a reality television show, discovering the show's appeal and exploring their viewing experience. The second section dives into the interviewees' perception of online hate speech, examining their personal definition on different articulations of speech, and suggesting possible stimulations for hate comments. In the final section, the researcher concludes the prior responses of the interviewees, and presents possible solutions to eliminate the fandom toxicity.

These results have been analyzed through three stages of coding (Appendix B). Once the interviews were accurately transcribed, the researcher separated the data into discrete parts and labeled them with codes that best describe the text. Through constant comparison and organizing the data according to the specific code with which they were tagged, the researcher was able to examine the findings without preconceived assumptions or prejudices, and discovered a total of 77 open codes.

After creating the open codes, the researcher began to draw connections between them, examining the codes and the underlying data to precisely categorize them. Through categorizing the open codes, the researcher created 15 axial codes. For instance, interviewees' opinions towards the "villain edit" and the extent of realness of reality television were all included under the axes of "authenticity of reality television". The axial code "hate speech personal definition" consisted of different interviewees' definitions of hate speech is another example. Axial coding helped clean up the set of supporting codes, assisting the researcher to find the overarching themes of the data.

Lastly, the 15 axial codes were categorized into 3 selective codes, namely "RuPaul's Drag Race viewing experience as a reality television show", "perception of online hate speech circulating RuPaul's Drag Race", and "responsibilities and solutions to online hate speech in the RuPaul's Drag Race fandom". After presenting the aforementioned three main categories, the researcher formed a discussion concerning the responsibility for and potential solution to hate speech, which then leads to answering the research question in the conclusion chapter.

4.1 Understanding RuPaul's Drag Race as Reality Television

In this section, the researcher presents the interviewees' four main appeals, namely dissecting reality, emotional attachment, trash-talk, and discussing queerness, of watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and connects the attractions to related insights.

4.1.1 RuPaul's Drag Race Viewing Experience: Dissecting the "Reality"

Amongst all the appeals of reality television, figuring out the authenticity of the show appears to be one of the most prominent attractions. Five interviewees expressed their interest in attempting to dissect the scripted fakeness and discover the purest reactions from the contestants. According to Hall's (2002) audience position theory, these interviewees view the show from the negotiated position, decoding the media text with and against the preferred reading simultaneously. This viewpoint allows the audience to question the authenticity of the produced reality while recognizing the reality television show's ability to utilize the competition format to comedically celebrate queer culture. The interviewees' curiosity to analyze reality television also aligns with Hill's (2002) indication of viewers constantly in search for the glimpse of authenticity within the unauthentic circumstances. Interview #9 (April 22, 2021) describes herself experiencing "a spidey sense kicking in" whenever the promised factual entertainment seems too entertaining to be true, prompting her to explore other perspectives or critiques outside of the show.

This notion of production awareness after viewing emerged as a common phenomenon across the interviewees, as eight interviewees expressed their habit to generally reconsider production's intervention after discussing the show with fellow fans, despite having certain suspicion or being partially conscious of production manipulation during viewing. Interviewee #2 (April 14, 2021) emphasized the "immersive mode" he turns to during viewing, soaking up the whole episode as presented without constant questioning. The authenticity of certain plotlines or reactions is only challenged when his reflective mind begins to function after viewing. In contrast to the majority, two interviewees stated that they were fully aware of production intervention during viewing, yet still being fully entertained by the television genre. Interviewee #5 (April 15, 2021) pointed out that constant awareness allows him to consume the content more accurately, instead of only touching on the surface level. Interestingly, both interviewees obtained a bachelor degree in communication, equipping themselves with media literacy skills to interpret common production manipulation.

Additionally, the habit of dissecting reality television demonstrates the interviewees' perception of the ambiguous genre through challenging the presented reality with their situated reality. When asked about the extent of the realness of reality television, all of the interviewees acknowledged that contestants' action and performance did occur, yet the unseen parts render the format unreal. Despite struggling to decisively define the factuality of the ambiguous genre, multiple interviewees brought up the ultimate disability of media to thoroughly represent the reality:

“Because in the exact moment that you’re trying to broadcast, produce, or control your reality, you immediately lose that authenticity to it.” (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

“In general, I think [reality television shows] are real, it’s just that we mistake reality television for everyday life. Because of course, the filming is only for a few weeks, and it doesn’t mean that a person is like that for the entire year.” (Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

Interviewee #4 (April 15, 2021) brought up the term “hyperreality” defined by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1995) as a representation without original reference:

“Hyperreal maybe [describes it] better, but I don’t want to get too Baudrillard, because he’s homophobic and horrible. There is this weird patina of reality, which almost invites you in, and then you realize that you’re not playing by the same rules. Like what you saw on the show is not representative of what happened.”

As shown in the statements, the interviewees agreed with the reality that reality televisions presented, yet simultaneously recognized that the presented reality is different from the reality the audiences are situated in. Although the interviewees expressed contrasting ideas to Bratich’s (2007) assumption that viewers frequently integrate their reality television experience with their daily life, the seemingly overlapping world continues to challenge the audiences’ ability to read media content with deliberate awareness. Combined with the social media revolution, the narrowing distance between the viewers and reality television celebrities creates a dangerous playground for unsolicited interactions once the audiences fail to differentiate the respective realities they are observing and living (Pearson, 2010).

Regarding the authenticity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, one interviewee acknowledged

that specifically for the drag competition show, since the editing of the show has always been in the center of the fandom discussion, debating the realness of each episode has become a part of the viewing experience. Despite executive producer RuPaul and co-host Michelle Visage clearly stating that there is no “villain edit” -- a term describing how production intervenes to paint certain contestants as the villain of the show -- considering the production in multiple podcasts, all of the interviewees agrees on the existence of production manipulation:

“There’s always that one person that everybody dislikes for some reason? And how does it happen? Like, how does everybody not like the same person every time?”
(Interviewee #6, April 20, 2021)

Interviewee #9 (April 22, 2021) especially pointed out the increasing production intervention she is perceiving from *RuPaul’s Drag Race*:

“In the first few seasons, maybe up to about eight or nine of Drag Race, I felt like it was something that was more genuine that I would normally see in a lot of reality television.”

However, the attitudes towards manipulation from the production varies amongst the interviewees. For most, the purpose of practicing villain edits to create compelling narrative and captivating entertainment was acknowledged. The interviewees understand that as a reality television show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has to meet the expectation of providing drama and heated debates amongst the contestants to satisfy the audiences’ need (Cummings, 2002). The production intervention is further explained by Hall’s (2002) encoding/decoding model, as producers originally produce the show based on assumption of audience, and continuously adapt the text according to the viewers’ feedback. Two interviewees explicitly described the shameful feeling they experience for enjoying such manipulated scenes that could potentially damage the contestant outside of the show:

“I find the drama and the fight very interesting. It sounds very cruel, but because you don’t really see that in real life, it’s fun to see people fight about very irrelevant stuff.”
(Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

“We know [the villain edit] exists but we’re at the same time enjoying it. It’s kind of embarrassing to say so.” (Interviewee #7, April 20, 2021)

For the others, the increasing production intervention has gone too far. Interviewee #9 (April 22, 2021) explains that despite creating certain roles for respective contestants that fleshes out the narrative of the show, by doing so, the production dehumanizes the participants as they lose their original personality:

“As a result of being stereotyped and put into those boxes, they lose their humanity. The production does bring people together of different personalities and backgrounds. Chop it up so that everybody gets humanized. Don’t throw a few people under the bus every season, because they’re human beings that have lives. They shouldn’t be used up for the show and then thrown out to deal with whatever happens afterwards.”

Another respondent pointed out that the forced narrative on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* often deprives the contestants’ opportunity to demonstrate their art and creativity, which for him is a huge disappointment since he highly admires the art of drag. He especially appreciated *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 9:

“The season allows the contestants to be like: ‘Hey, this is what we’re good at.’ Leaving sooner does not mean that they’re worse than others, they just fail to sell nice stuff.” (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

Considering whether to favor the compelling narrative through production intervention or maintaining the fairness of the competition with less manipulation, the interviewees expressed divisive opinions. Four interviewees prioritized structured storytelling, indicating that drama and fights are essential to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Interviewee #5 (April 16, 2021) specifically stated that the show which started off as a parody of *America’s Next Top Model* and *Project Runway* has never been a competition show:

“I don’t think *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is set up to be a competitive pageant show. I think that’s one of the biggest misconceptions people have. Producers are trying to make it come across as competition, but it is seldom fair.”

Other interviewees disagreed with production forcing narratives or applying favoritism towards certain contestants. Contrary to the statement above, interviewee #6 deems that since the show’s slogan is to “find the next drag superstar”, eliminating contestants that outperformed others for drama is unjustified (April 20, 2021). Interviewee #2 (April 14, 2021) claimed that the episodes where the challenges allowed the contestants to

showcase their talent and presented fair judging are often the ones he enjoyed the most. That being said, all six interviewees that favored fairness of the competition mentioned their appeal to captivating drama, yet believed that unprejudiced judging, combined with the talent and personal background stories of the participants can nevertheless stimulate intriguing narratives.

4.1.2 RuPaul's Drag Race Viewing Experience: Emotional Attachment and Self-reflection

According to the respondents, another major appeal to reality television is the stimulation of strong emotions. Interviewee #7 (April 20, 2021) indicated that compared to fictional drama series, reality television prompts more intense reactions from her due to the examination of real people instead of fictional characters:

“I feel more strongly about reality television because we’re talking about real people, not actors. It’s the life of that person, not a character in a movie or a TV drama.”

The statement aligns with Penzhorn and Pitout’s (2007) claim that since the reality television celebrities exist in the same universe of the viewers, the active involvement of the audience intensifies the emotional connection. As a distinguishing element of the reality television genre defined by Penzhorn and Pitout (2007), voyeurism further strengthens the viewers’ emotional attachment as the show invites them into the most intimate world of the contestants. Interviewee #7 (April 20, 2021) blatantly expressed her interest in peeping into others personal lives:

“ I don’t know if it’s based on my culture, but who doesn’t like to know about other people’s lives? My life can be a bit of a routine, but you see all those people’s lives. It’s an experience of what they’re living so it’s entertaining.”

Contrary to Bratich’s (2007) indication of reality television creating the experience of “incapism”, the interviewee enjoys experiencing alternative life through the factual entertainment genre, regarding the sensation as escapism rather than the former. Nonetheless, the sense of escapism, which is often associated with fictional drama, did not hinder the temptation of the interviewee to judge the television personas based on their authenticity or reflect on the contestants’ social moralities upon herself. In fact, over half of the interviewees decided that reality television provides a more direct approach for self-reflection compared to fictional drama:

“So I think people can relate to [reality television] more because they think they know those people. It’s this sort of parasocial relationship that they create. But with fictional shows, movies, books, or even just regular celebrities, there is that note of theatricality to it.” (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

“I think in the times where I felt seen or could relate to people, it has been in reality television where I resonated more. When I found people who have had those life experiences [through reality television], it felt like a more empathic understanding and connection.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

“For example, if the drag queens talk about coming out, or the struggles of fitting in, you can so easily reflect on yourself, because you know that person is real, and they actually went through it.” (Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

The above answers demonstrate how reality television provides the viewers opportunities for honest self-reflection. By acknowledging the reality television persona actually experienced certain trauma or epiphany personally, the interviewees feel more understood and represented, opening up more conversation with themselves. One interviewee especially connected with *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, as the show assisted them with discovering their own identity:

“When I first started watching *Drag Race*, I didn’t really know who I was in terms of gender or sexuality. I was living in a house with my then-girlfriend and two other flatmates, which one of them is gay. I always thought of myself as bisexual, but I didn’t identify as non-binary. And at first I questioned if I was queer enough to watch this.” (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

Another interviewee confronted his internal homophobia as a gay male by reflecting on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*:

“Some internal homophobia flares up. It keeps me in check. The extreme end of queerness makes me push myself a little bit more and be more open to myself and recognize things in my head that didn’t feel right.” (Interviewee #2, April 14, 2021)

However, two interviewees questioned reality television's ability to provide opportunities for self-reflection. Interviewee #6 (April 20, 2021) argued that fictional characters allow more space for imagination and interpretation:

“You are never exactly the same as someone who really exists, but a fictional character can be anything you want. So they can also be you.”

This answer points out the common practice of viewers simultaneously identifying the similarities and dissimilarities between themselves and the television personas. As the interviewee indicated, no one can ever find someone completely identical to oneself. Therefore, self-identification and criticizing differences often come hand in hand, which implies the risk of ostracizing contestants or fellow fans for reality television to stimulate such strong emotional attachment. Interviewee #5 (April 16, 2021) completely neglects reality television in regards to self-reflection, describing the viewing experience as “going to the zoo to see monkeys”. The perception stems from overly produced and exaggerated circumstances that dehumanized contestants, erasing their personal characteristics.

4.1.3 RuPaul's Drag Race Viewing Experience: Trash-Talk and Social Responsibility

The final attraction of reality television that most interviewees brought up is how highly discussable the shows are. The discussion could range from complete trash-talk about dramatic narratives and chaotic personas, to social issues presented in the show that are relevant to the audience's reality. For the former, interviewee #1 (April 14, 2021) described his discussion with fellow reality television viewers similar to gossiping, yet ended up as a morality debate:

“I was watching *Love is Blind* on Netflix with my housemates super hungover. We were like: ‘She’s awful. Oh my god, why is she wearing something that makes her look fat?’ But then someone said: ‘You shouldn’t body shame’.”

Another interviewee also enjoyed trash-talking about reality television with their friend group, and deemed it as an effective way to enhance personal connections and create an inclusive community:

“It’s a very sociable activity, in the same way that watching a bad movie is really sociable. I think it has really helped bind a lot of my connections, my friends and my

flatmates. It gives us something to do together and argue about if someone was right or wrong. You trash-talk about trash-talk. It's great." (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

For trash-talking to be considered as an essential activity of the reality television experience explains why three interviewees enjoyed the genre for its requirement of "brainless" effort. However, morality debates following the bad-mouth demand answers for what degree of social responsibility does reality television hold. To establish a standard, the researcher explained Hill's (2002) classification of reality television as a post-documentary genre and questioned the interviewees whether or not reality television should be held accountable as documentaries regarding social issues. Although there are opportunities to address social constructs in reality television, the majority of the interviewees claimed that entertainment value should be the main priority. Interviewee #1 (April 14, 2021) indicated that the majority of the viewers only watch reality television for entertainment, which hinders the production to devote more effort to starting important conversations in the show:

"Everyone is an activist until the day they need people out there on the streets to protest. That's as simple as it gets. The hardcore groups who want to see changes in a couple of months are just minorities of the total volume of viewers. People watch reality television to have a good time."

That being said, three interviewees demonstrated higher standards for reality television, deeming that the factual entertainment genre should be as socially responsible as documentaries. Interviewee #4 (April 15, 2021) compared reality television to stand-up comedies, questioning the usage of humor as excuses for hideous remarks:

"For stand-up comedy, people have this general sort of accepted wisdom that if you go on stage, there are inverted commas over the whole stage. I don't really buy that. It gives you free rein to say any horrendous shit you want to say. And in the same way, I think when entertainment is your goal, you'll pretty much do anything."

Interviewee #7 (April 20, 2021) indicated that if reality television shows are more socially responsible, the social responsibility realizes the reality by connecting the produced reality to the viewers' situated reality with social issues, which helps the production persuade the audience of the show's authenticity:

“If it doesn’t have a little bit of reality, it falls into that gap of: ‘Oh, it’s dramatic. This is too fake.’ To have that engagement towards the current world and trends makes it feel real.”

Despite the contrasting opinions, the interviewees expressed an overall consensus that the extent of social responsibility of reality television differs on the platforms. For instance, shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* that give voice to minority groups and constantly discusses social issues regarding gender, sexuality, and racial discrimination should be more cautious regarding the message they convey. Interviewees also noted that the scale of the shows influences the responsibility they hold--the more mainstream, the more deliberate the production needs to be:

“I don’t need an MTV produced reality show to come with high moral standards, because that’s just not what they produce.” (Interviewee #1, April 14, 2021)

All in all, although most interviewees acknowledged that reality television is ultimately for entertainment, if the show represents certain values or communities, they should be more aware and be held accountable for the relevant social issues.

4.1.4 RuPaul’s Drag Race Viewing Experience: Queer Culture and Community

When questioned for the deciding features that make *RuPaul’s Drag Race* stand out from other reality television shows, all interviewees mentioned the discussion of queerness as one of the deciding features. Interviewees praised the show for bringing mainstream spotlights onto the LGBTQ+ community, and discussing controversial social topics in a flamboyant and delightful manner:

“It’s always nice to have some gender fuckery going on, an urban talk of queerness. I feel like there’s a certain queer camaraderie to it, which, for me, makes it stand out above most of the shows that I’ve watched in that sort of mold.” (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

“It’s a show that talks about controversial topics that people often avoid in such a fashionable and funny way. They open up difficult conversations without making it feel like they are strictly educating you or enforcing their perspectives.” (Interviewee #3, April 15, 2021)

More specifically, *RuPaul's Drag Race* introduced the art of drag to multiple interviewees. Even for interviewees that had heard the term of drag, the show provided a deeper understanding of the profession and the drag queens:

“Before I watched the show, I thought: ‘Okay, it’s guys dressing up as girls that perform funny shows.’ But you get so much respect for the profession and for what they actually do [after watching *RuPaul's Drag Race*] because there’s so much more to it than just wearing a wig or a dress.” (Interviewee #3, April 15, 2021)

The fashion, performance, and creativity of the contestants shine through on the main stage of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Mixing the competition element and the dramatic fights and backstories of the drag queens proved to be an effective format for the interviewees, as the show discovered a “bliss point” between the spectrum of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Voice*.

Lastly, the interviewees appreciated the inclusive yet exclusive community that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has created from the distinctive culture that it was established on. For inclusivity, the show welcomes everyone with its untiring effort of minority representation. For exclusivity, the show has created specific language and terms for its fandom to communicate, creating a closer community.

4.2 Online Hate Speech

In this section, the researcher presents the interviewees’ personal definition of different articulations of speech and demonstrates their assumptions of the stimulation and prominence of hate speech circulating in the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom.

4.2.1 Defining Articulations of Speech

To discover the stemming points of online hate speech within the fandom of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and further suggest potential solutions, the interviewees were asked to classify three articulations of speech, namely shade/roasts, critical opinions, and hate speech.

For shade/roasts the interviewees agreed on three main features that differentiate “reading” from the others. Six interviewees brought up the relationship between the reader and the receiver, indicating that shade/roasts are often insults exchanged between friends or close connections. This notion is further narrowed down by the second feature, where interviewees highlighted the receivers’ acceptance and consent of the shade/roasts.

Interviewee #2 (April 14, 2021) further pointed out that if both parties agreed to participate in the roast, like how RuPaul states in the show “the library is opened”, the entertainment value would increase due to the participants being allowed to be bolder in their comments:

“I like it when there’s variation, and it’s no holds barred. Everybody’s there for it, and it’s been framed as ‘this is the read’, no holds barred.”

However, agreeing on being read does not indicate the receiver has to accept every insult, especially when the humor is missing. The third feature of shade/roasts is the inclusion of humorous sarcasm, joking manners, or dark humor. Ultimately, it is still the receivers’ decision on whether or not a read is offensive or hilarious, which ties back to the second feature:

“If you yourself could laugh about it and think it’s unharmed, then I think it is a funny read.” (Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

As for critical opinions or critiques, the interviewees identified four deciding features. Firstly, two interviewees claimed the importance of similar power relations. This feature is similar to requiring close relationships for reading, but emphasizes the personal knowledge and ability of the critics. Both interviewees brought up the spin-off web show *Fashion Photo Review* to exemplify their opinion:

“[Raven and Raja] can critique looks and makeup because they are the best in that [realm]. That’s why the production chose them [to host the show].” (Interviewee #7, April 20, 2021)

“Who am I to say something about their drag? I have never tried to make a garment or wear anything for a runway.” (Interviewee #6, April 20, 2021)

Other interviewees however prioritized the content of the comments. Five interviewees demanded constructive reasoning and suggested solutions for a speech to qualify as a critique. Reliable sources, validated arguments, and the means to resolve issues can contextualize the speech and help the receivers improve. Nuanced comments embedded in enough context could benefit the receiver despite conveying negative messages.

For the third feature, three interviewees mentioned the importance of the intention. If the motive of pointing out negative aspects of a drag queen’s art is to assist her in improving

her drag, the speech is more critical than hateful. One interviewee proposed other fans question themselves before lashing out with negative comments:

“What is the purpose or the intention of the comment? Like, what are you trying to do? Why are you conveying the message?” (Interviewee #6, April 20, 2021)

The fourth remark is similar to the framed circumstance for shade/roasts, as two interviewees focused on the receivers’ invitation on critiques. The invitation could range from text messages asking for opinions to participation in a competition reality show:

“I think that [critiquing] is a part of the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fandom, because it’s a show where people get judged. So the judges lead the way in that sense, and I think that’s all valid conversation.” (Interviewee #2, April 14, 2021)

Lastly, for hate speech, the interviewees recognized four features. There is an overall consensus amongst seven interviewees that personal attack is directly connected with hate speech. Whether commenting on someone’s personality, body figure, or people surrounding the target are all unacceptable since the receiver can hardly make changes to these remarks:

“I see hate speech as a direct attack and shaming or humiliating somebody about their physical features or judgments about who they are as a person. It’s like low hanging fruit.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

“Just commenting ‘you’re fat and ugly’, that’s not really constructive. No one could do anything with that.” (Interviewee #3, April 15, 2021)

The second feature involves the mannerism of the speech. If the comment involves threatening language, unsolicited swear words, or blatantly expressing ill-wills, it should be considered as hate speech:

“It’s not only what you say, but also how you say it.” (Interviewee #6, April 20, 2021)

“I guess I see hate speech is something that’s very direct, and usually, it’s quite clearly detrimental.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

“I think it’s more about the incitement to violence. Something more threatening in the language?” (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

Thirdly, four respondents pointed out that amount matters. One hateful comment might be easily overlooked as a troll message by the receiver, yet when thousands of them pile up, the receiver often starts to question his/her own perception and surrender to the negative remarks:

“I mean, one comment is bearable. But thousands and thousands of [hate comments], they can harm someone.” (Interviewee #7, April 20, 2021)

Last but not least, three interviewees called attention to whether or not the comment is public or targeted at someone. The targeting could be in the form of tagging the receivers’ accounts, using hashtags, or simply commenting under the target’s social media posts. Direct messages and other forms of direct contact are undeniably included. Interviewee #10 (April 22, 2021) indicated that to whom the message is conveyed decides the scale of discussion:

“If you’re sharing your opinion on social media, even just on your page that might be private, you should be open to discussion about your post. But if you’re sharing it with just one friend, that means that you are open to discuss it with just that one friend.”

Overall, the interviewees defined hate speech similarly to Assimakopoulos et al. (2017) in regards to threatening language and personal attack, yet added on more features such as the number of comments and the targeting of the speech.

4.2.2 Stimulation of Hate Speech in RuPaul’s Drag Race Fandom

To the question of what the stimulations of hate speech within the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fandom are, all respondents pointed out the common urge to seek validation of one’s opinion, and the lack of expressive approaches for some viewers that contradicts the former. Interviewee #8 (April 22, 2021), a *RuPaul’s Drag Race* reviewer who currently has 47,000 subscribers on YouTube, shared his personal experience with season 11 contestant Ariel Versace:

“She watched all of my reviews up until the episode that she was eliminated in, and she went off on me. I get it in the sense that she’s frustrated because she was eliminated, and she needs to take it out on somebody. I never held it against her, but

you have to also ask yourself: 'Why are you looking for stuff?' We're all looking for validation, but you must know that somebody won't agree with you."

Other interviewees also expressed the habit to consume *RuPaul's Drag Race* review shows and podcasts after viewing, or go through fellow fans' comments to search for opinions similar to theirs. All 10 interviewees indicated the importance of a viewing friend group, as expressive approaches behind closed doors when the emotions are intense are necessary. The respondents' approaches to digest their emotions proposed a potential stimulation of hate speech as certain "haters" lack the needed circle to absorb their impulsive and unconsidered opinions:

"I can't really imagine myself watching it alone." (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

"I didn't really know any people who were watching it. I wish I was in a group that I could talk to and not have to always turn to the internet." (Interviewee #6, April 20, 2021)

"If you get frustrated with the show and don't have an outlet in real life to let it all out and end it there, it's just going to give birth to an entire monster." (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

This is not to say that online communication does not serve as an appropriate expressive approach for emotional fans. However, the interviewees deemed two features of online communication problematic when it comes to fostering online hate speech. Four interviewees indicated that the anonymity encourages fans to express unsolicited comments due to the lack of accountability behind their actions. Two respondents pointed out the spontaneously reactive nature of online commenting, as a simple text could easily spiral into a heated and hurtful debate. The latter aligns with Coffey and Woolworth's (2004) indication of the danger of instantaneous back and forth exchange, and is further backed up by Brown's (2018) explanation that the easy access to online commenting leads to unconsidered remarks.

The respondents further dissected the heated emotions and opinions of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom as a result of the social television format and the divisive nature of competition. Unlike other competitive reality television shows, *RuPaul's Drag Race* casts contestants that often have their own fan base prior to the airing. Due to the diverse personalities and representation of each drag queen, the fans are also frequently divided into rooting for different contestants. Interviewee #9 (April 22, 2021) brought up the infamous

case of “fans’ favorite” Valentina’s fandom haunting fellow season 9 contestants to exemplify the fandom toxicity:

“It freaks me out how possessive, intense, and negative people can be. People who have been supportive of Valentina in season 9 were way over the top that I feel like they need to focus on life. Life is hard enough.”

The divergence created from fans rooting for different contestants to win is further intensified by the evolution of reality television into social television. According to Van Es (2016), the more audiences are incorporated to participate and influence the show, the more they feel emotionally attached and connected to it. Interviewee #10 (April 22, 2021) claimed that despite most of the program being pre-recorded (with the exception of the Reunion episode and the Finale), the social media strategies of *Rupual’s Drag Race* still convince fans to constantly engage in conversation regarding the show:

“For *Drag Race*, they give a lot of power to the audience. They follow the hashtags on Twitter and ask us who we think is going to win. Because of that, the audience feels the responsibility and the connectivity to the show--they feel like a part of the show.”

To conclude all the potential stimulation mentioned above, one interviewee pointed out the insufficient media literacy of certain viewers. The respondent pointed out the cultural difference between Europe and the United States, and assumed how it might reflect on fans’ reaction in regards to spreading hate speech, specifically for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 13 and UK season 2:

“It’s not just a matter of the year we’re living in. Even though *Drag Race UK* season 2 is very much produced, there was not much hate compared to US season 13. It might be culturally related. In the US, the culture is very toxic about being respectful and politically correct. The US makes a really huge deal out of it. Meanwhile, in Europe, I don’t think many people would care about these things that much. The audience just has to be media literate.” (Interviewee #10, April 22, 2021)

The ability for viewers to consume media content correctly is undoubtedly not only correlated to the geographic culture, but also demands the viewers’ self-effort to constantly question their approach of digesting media text, keeping up with the constantly evolving entertainment industry. This suggestion is further explained by the emphasis on television

criticism of Vande Berg et al. (2004), as once the audiences understand multiple means of production intervention, they will be able to differentiate the produced reality and their situated reality.

4.2.3 Hate Speech Prominence in RuPaul's Drag Race Fandom

Discussion surrounding the fandom toxicity has constantly been present throughout the airing of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the scale continues to expand. Aside from the stimulations addressed in the previous section, the interviewees were questioned about their perspective of the prominence of hate speech in *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom compared to other reality television shows. One deciding factor that six interviewees mutually indicated was the representation of minorities. Interviewee #7 (April 20, 2021) pointed out that once minority groups finally get represented on television, they are going to be especially vocal and aware of any misrepresentation since they have been silenced for so long and there are only so few of them:

“Gottmik is now representing the community of transgender people, and now transgenders are finally feeling represented. Of course they’re going to remain strong and defensive about their community.”

Other interviewees complemented the argument by indicating how minority representatives are often held to such high standards that any tiny mistake could lead to a full-blown argument:

“They have to represent so much. Sometimes they can be held at this perfectionist standard, which at the end of the day is dehumanizing. There’s just no space for them to be human.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

Despite being a platform that celebrates minority representation, *RuPaul's Drag Race* suffers from the inner divergence of the LGBTQ+ community. Due to the expansive inclusion of multiple sub-groups in the community, minorities frequently fall into the trap of being pitted against each other when differences emerge. Interviewee #5 (April 16, 2021) explained how being a minority to the white heteronormative society can influence the fans’ behavior:

“It’s so common for minorities to attack each other and be especially critical because you’re all kind of fighting for second place. The white establishment will always have first place and you’re just fighting against each other to not get the last place.”

Another respondent that identifies as gay male acknowledged his inner homophobia, and assumed his conflict could potentially ignite toxic conversation within the fandom:

“Somewhere in my head to some degree, I’m just conscious: ‘That’s too gay for me’.”
(Interviewee #2, April 14, 2021)

For *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fandom to mostly consist of queer people and heterosexual females, respondents claimed that the stereotypes and history of queer culture could be factors for the prominence of hate speech. For the former, two interviewees pointed out the stereotypical behaviors of queer people, and how the show reduplicates these stereotypes, influencing its viewers to perform in said ways:

“I do think that there is more [hate speech] on *Drag Race*, because *Drag Race* does sometimes try to sell this kind of stereotype where queer people have to be catty, and many fans adopt that kind of persona.” (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

“I think it’s accepted because that’s the culture, but the same thing transcends to the fans. They’re calling each other out in comments and saying shit because their idols are doing it and they think that justifies their behavior.” (Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

Interviewee #3 (April 15, 2021) however suggested that since the queer community has received so much hate in history, the fandom and contestants have collectively decided to be more vocal about the circulating toxicity:

“The LGBTQ+ and the drag queen community have received hate all these years, so they try to keep the community clean. Saying: ‘Okay, at least within the community, we respect each other’.”

This assumption suggests that the prominence of hate speech within the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fandom might be at the same degree as other reality television shows, yet the fandom discusses it more, making it seem more conspicuous. The higher standard imposed on the show can also be justified by the “wokeness” of the fandom. Multiple interviewees

indicated that queer people are normally more “woke” regarding social issues, resulting in a more critical fandom when it comes to shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*:

“You’re going to be held to a higher degree of scrutiny because it’s not only a silly show that a lot of people in that community watch. Those people care very much about representation, diversity, language, all of those things.” (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

As demonstrated in the statement, whether the toxicity is actually more prominent or simply brought up more within the fandom, the minority representation and queer culture *RuPaul’s Drag Race* embodies have assuredly been playing a key role in the phenomenon.

4.2.4 Cancel Culture

To clarify the relationship between online hate speech and cancel culture, the interviewees were questioned on their perception of the latter. According to the respondents, the most significant difference is that cancel culture provides a sense of justice and a purpose to withdraw problematic artists’/celebrities’ platforms. Interviewee #1 (April 14, 2021) demonstrated his struggle on cancelling season 12 contestant Sherry Pie, yet ultimately deeming that justice has to be served:

“Cancelling Sherry was also something I really struggled with. I really like her drag. I really, really did. So I was kind of devastated. But I also think it was a good choice to not give her that platform.”

Despite agreeing on the necessity of calling out problematic people, few interviewees claimed that cancel culture fails to provide second chances and goes overboard too swiftly. Interviewee #1 (April 14, 2021) compared cancelled artists to criminals, questioning the unfair treatment of the latter being able to redeem themselves and the former not. Interviewee #6 (April 20, 2021) acknowledged the good intention of cancel culture, yet deemed it escalated to an extreme too fast “like everything else in the world.”

One respondent provided a different perspective on cancel culture, claiming that the term serves more as a tool to condemn the left than actually providing concrete meaning. They accurately explained their observation by addressing cancel culture as a “systemic illness”:

“I think it’s almost as funny as a meme, because it’s so not a thing. The whole Charlyne Yi, James Franco stuff that has been popping up over the past few days is like systemic illness. The right really likes to pick it up as a word to prove that the left is somehow canceling X, Y, and Z people, when in actual fact more than likely they’re attempting to exert some sort of moral influence and a greater interrogation with things that they have done.” (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

In conclusion, the interviewees’ points of view aligned with Ng’s (2020) perspective on cancel culture. The respondents are able to differentiate the deciding factors that separate cancel culture from online hate speech, yet were still able to call out the problematic similarities of destroying someone through speech collectively.

4.3. Discussion: Responsibility and Solutions for Hate Speech

With the interviewees’ perceptions of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a reality television show and their understanding of online hate speech uncovered, this final section aims to connect the dots and suggest potential solutions according to whom the respondents consider should take the responsibility.

According to the interviewees, as a show that labels itself as the platform for minority representation and disseminating queer culture, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* should be held to a higher standard regarding social responsibility despite being in the genre of reality television which is mostly responsible for providing pure entertainment. Based on this notion, although respondents enjoy the melodramatic fights on the show, some interviewees disagree with production framing certain contestants as villains, as it stimulates hate speech towards them, and dehumanizes them as an individual with other personalities. Painting contestants in a bad light is especially dangerous due to the evolution of social television which narrows down the distance between television celebrities and the fandom (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). For the production to encourage engagement through social media, persuading the audience that they have a say in the show’s results, further blurred the already ambiguous line between the produced reality and the viewers’ situated reality. The compelling narrative that production creates to attract viewers therefore poses more threat to stimulate hate speech as fans fail to differentiate the truth and the produced.

When questioned whether the production should be held accountable for the hate speech contestants received, three interviewees consider them responsible for the negative remarks. One interviewee expressed strong discontent towards the production, calling them

out for knowing the result for certain edits, yet consistently failing to protect their contestants:

“I think the show and RuPaul drag their feet when it comes to this. It takes so fucking long to a point it’s grossly inappropriate. I think they need to be more on top of it. They’ve done the edits, they can probably have good estimations of what’s going to come out of it.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

The other seven interviewees consider the production not responsible for the hate speech, yet mutually decided that they are responsible for the content they broadcast. Multiple respondents acknowledged that the production would not be able to create an entertaining show if they edited all the drama out. The interviewees’ understandings of reality television align with Cumming’s (2002) and Van Es’s (2016) assumptions that exaggerated reaction of contestants and over-dramatic narratives are essential for a successful show. Some interviewees also pointed out that those heated dramas did actually happen, and it is the production’s job to demonstrate the “reality” to the audience:

“She did behave that way. She was perceived as arrogant by me.” (Interviewee #1, April 14, 2021)

The above statement brings us to question the responsibility of the contestants for receiving hate speech. In one of the deciding factors for a comment to be deemed as a critique, interviewees pointed out that if contestants signed up for a competition show, they should be ready to get judged not only by the judges but by the viewers also. As reality television participants gradually became an occupation, the contestants are more aware of the contracts they have to follow and the aftermath they often face (Jost, 2010). This phenomenon is especially prominent in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as queens frequently create content for their social media prior to the airing, matching the broadcast schedule to further promote their brand. The self-branding practice extends to the queens’ performance on the show, as contestants from recent seasons such as Kameron Michaels and Utica Queen showcased their fear of cancel culture, self-producing their character to avoid criticism.

Considering the contestants obtained prior knowledge of the fans’ common reaction to the airing, the respondents were questioned whether they considered the participants responsible for the hate speech they received. The majority of the interviewees indicated that

the contestants are not responsible for the hate speech, yet responsible for the behavior they presented on the screen:

“You are responsible for your behavior, whether being aggressive or making threats. If someone calls you out for that, then you’re responsible for it.” (Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

“Just because somebody is not like you doesn’t mean you freaking send death threats and shit to them. I don’t think they deserve it in any way.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

That being said, respondents claimed that contestants should be equipped with a certain amount of knowledge and awareness of what might come with the promising opportunity, especially when there are sufficient past seasons for reference. It would be “naive” for the contestants to walk in the show assuming everyone will admire her. Interviewee #2 (April 14, 2021) agreed that the contestants are responsible for the hate speech because it has become “a part of the deal”, and that some of the most renowned drag queens were born as “villains”.

Regarding the fandom’s responsibility, the two prior sections provide insightful phenomena and critical perspectives. Revisiting the four major appeals to *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a reality television show, the researcher identifies that the ambiguous boundary between the produced reality and situated reality is further blurred by the intense emotions often attached to the viewing experience. This requires the audience to obtain sufficient media literacy to be capable of differentiating the truth and the presented truth, and digesting their feelings in an unharmed way. As an inseparable experience, trash-talking is an efficient way for fans to express their emotions stimulated from the dramas, yet only when it is kept in an inner viewing circle or not targeted towards certain contestants. Lastly, if most viewers appreciate *RuPaul’s Drag Race* for its discussion of queerness, inclusivity of minorities, and the distinctive culture shared within the community, the fandom should collectively acknowledge the inner divergence within the LGBTQ+ community, and allow more voices and conversation without condemning or silencing them immediately. Once the audiences start to examine the gap between their expectations of the show and their actions within the queer community, the reproduction process Hall (2002) indicates in the encoding/decoding model could yield beneficial behavioral consequences that influences the audiences’ reality.

In regards to the research of Olivia et al. (2020) on creating artificial intelligence to

cancel hate speech towards drag queens, the researcher questioned the interviewees' perspectives on social media censoring. Eight interviewees supported the idea, deeming it the most cost-efficient way to deal with problematic comments. Interviewee #4 (April 15, 2021) especially indicated the added benefits for censoring out the initial wave of hate speech using the example of Trump:

“As soon as you stop that person from creating that first wave of news, it disappears from your timeline a little bit. This obviously doesn't delete authoritarianism, fascism, or racism, but I think it can have a really positive effect.”

To defend their support of censoring, five respondents claimed that freedom has limitations, and that hate speech should not be protected by freedom of speech. The respondents acknowledged that causing harm to others is an act of infringement on their freedom to live. One respondent emphasized the importance of governance over the society to ensure minorities' rights:

“I don't think it's an infringement on free speech. Government systems are in place to ensure that everybody, not just people that fit well within a patriarchal system, can live and thrive and not have to worry about being attacked.” (Interviewee #9, April 22, 2021)

Aside from governmental influence, three interviewees also recognized the power of the social media enterprises, reckoning them as private companies that have the right to decide the content they wish to censor out despite the fearfully immense power. Interviewee #8 (April 22, 2021) pointed out that there are always platforms for certain types of language for everyone. The only difference is the visibility and the scale of the social platform. Three interviewees further questioned the composition of the creators of censoring tools implemented by huge social media companies, as it reflects on the sexism and racism standards. This suspicion of creators of censoring tools being overtly dominated by white males complements Olivia et al.'s (2020) concern of LGBTQ+ terms being wrongfully associated with hateful words.

On the other hand, two respondents opposed censoring, emphasizing detrimental results such as silencing minorities or establishing ideologies through banning people that hold different beliefs. Interestingly, one of the interviewees who agreed on the villain edits of the contestants strongly opposed the “manipulation” of viewers' opinions.

Aside from the conventional censoring, two interviewees suggested new approaches to filter out hate speech, namely add-on extensions and limiting commenting rights:

“Maybe it would be wise to have add-on filters, and people would just install it on their own browser extension.” (Interviewee #1, April 14, 2021)

“You shouldn’t be able to comment under a video on YouTube unless you have seen every single second of that video, because commenting on something without knowing the full picture of it doesn’t help the creator.” (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

From the production perspective, the respondents suggested five ways for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* to deal with the fandom toxicity while maintaining the entertainment value. Firstly, interviewee #4 (April 15, 2021) proposed the production to hire a more diverse group of editors to avoid misrepresentation of minority groups:

“Hire a more diverse group of people to help you produce and edit the show. All you need is more people of color, more indigenous people, more trans and non-binary people in the editing room so that the [issues] the internet goes crazy about might not happen.”

Eight interviewees suggested incorporating scenes in the show that demonstrate a sense of reconciliation between contestants after a dramatic fight, or include disclaimers to remind fans of the difference between the produced reality and their situated reality:

“We always get like one single sentence in the next episode saying: ‘Yeah, we’re okay now.’ But it would be nice to show them actually making amends and talking about it.” (Interviewee #3, April 15, 2021)

“You could put a warning in the show saying: ‘The next clip contains strong language and violent scenes. We do not endorse it. However, this is a reality television show, so we do want to show it.’” (Interviewee #5, April 16, 2021)

The respondents deem incorporating messages within the show as more efficient than posting on social media after the hate speech has spread like wildfire in the case of season 13 contestant Kandy Muse. Four interviewees specifically called out World of Wonder for being

“hypocritical”, as they allowed hateful comments to spiral for “engagement” before defending their cast member:

“That’s the sad truth. Any exposure, even online hate speech is engagement. There’s no such thing as bad publicity.” (Interviewee #1, April 14, 2021)

Other interviewees condemned the insufficient content of the social media post, demanding more contextualization and depth to accurately educate toxic fans:

“It’s like [putting] on a bandaid over the Grand Canyon.” (Interviewee #7, April 20, 2021)

“You want someone in charge of the social media team who actually has written something informative and contextualized what the show is. It’s about trying to uphold the standards within the community.” (Interviewee #4, April 15, 2021)

The fourth solution requires the production to provide sufficient guidance for its contestants, ranging from preparing a healthy mindset arriving at the show to dealing with potential hate speech and mental health issues after airing. These could be in the form of arranging social media training or therapy sessions for the contestants who need assistance.

Lastly, in response to the manipulated competition, three interviewees proposed that the production edit less to avoid dehumanizing the contestants. Despite performing in a different reality created by the production, the contestants return to viewers’ situated reality after filming, forcing them to confront any extreme reaction from the fandom. The respondents acknowledge the phenomenal platform *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has provided to the contestants, but deemed their current behavior “negligent”:

“Just let them be the main protagonists of the challenges. If it’s an acting challenge, let them choose what they’re going to act. Don’t try to push storylines. If the storyline is not genuinely there, the fans will be able to tell.” (Interviewee #8, April 22, 2021)

For the contestants, interviewee #2 (April 14, 2021) suggested fellow drag queens voice clearance for their bullied sisters. He exemplified his suggestion with the aftermath of UK Season 2 fan-favorite Bimini Bon Boulash losing to Lawrence Chaney in the finale:

“I think what turned [the hate] around was Bimini saying that [Lawrence] deserved to win immediately. So it softened everybody’s view.”

Last but not least, for the *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans, aside from equipping oneself with more sufficient media literacy, the respondents suggested fans create more expressive approaches within the fandom, establishing safe inner circles that allow the members to exchange emotional and unconsidered opinions. By doing so, the hate speech would more likely be kept within the walls, protecting the drag queens from unnecessary harm.

5.0 Conclusion

To the main research question of “how do *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fans perceive the online toxicity in the fandom”, the researcher discovers that despite mixed opinions on production manipulation, all respondents agreed on the existence of “villain edits” regarding *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and showcased concerns for fans who lack media literacy to appropriately digest their emotion or intimate expressive approaches to seek validation. Interviewees that supported structured narratives emphasized the importance of compelling storytelling for a reality television show, and enjoyed dissecting the “hyperreality” of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. On the other hand, interviewees that prioritized fair competition feared contestants being dehumanized by the production if the audience fails to differentiate the produced reality and the viewers’ situated reality. In other words, all respondents demonstrated the need for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* fans to situate themselves in the negotiated audience position proposed by Hall (2002), and continuously practice television criticism suggested by Vande Berg et al. (2004) despite people deeming most reality television shows brainless guilty pleasures.

This label however should not be applied to *RuPaul’s Drag Race* due to its main appeal to fans being the discussion and embodiment of queer culture. As a show that celebrates gender fluidity, racial equality, and minority representation, the interviewees claimed that a higher social responsibility standard is necessary. The same level of scrutiny should therefore be implemented on the fandom regarding hate speech circulating online since according to Gruzd et al. (2011), upholding similar values is a requirement for creating virtual communities. Unfortunately, the queerness of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* also serves as the show’s biggest nemesis. Respondents identified the inner divergence of the queer community to be the principal factor of the prominence of hate speech, as different sub-groups within the fandom fight for the “second place” following white heteronormative establishment. Minority representation contributes to the already vulnerable fandom forum as a transgender representative such as Gottmik tip-toes to portray her community perfectly in fear of offending anyone. The heightened concern of displeasing viewers also stems from the ongoing cancel culture, often too quick to end others’ careers in pursuit of people’s own version of justice. Additionally, queer stereotypes such as being “catty” or “bitchy” embedded in the fandom and reduplicated on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* only further stimulate unintentional hate when fans fail to find the fine line between different articulations of speech, deeming the embodying drag queens’ behavior in the produced reality suitable for

their situated reality.

To help create a safer online space for discussion within the fandom, the researcher presents the interviewees' defining characteristics of shade/reading, critiques, and hate speech in an attempt to provide guidance to fans who contribute to discussions online. For shade/reading, the key feature is the personal relationship between "readers" and receivers. Regardless of the remark obtaining humorous sarcasm, if both parties are not intimate enough or disagree on participating in the roast, no jokes can justify the negative comments. As for critiques, respondents mutually indicated that for the contestants to participate in a competition show, they have invited the viewers to critique and judge their performance. However, fans should still consider whether or not their remarks contain constructive reasoning and potential solutions. Lastly, to diminish the circulating hate speech in the fandom, fans should avoid using threatening language or comment on contestants' personal remarks, whether it be their personality or body figure. This is not to say that intense opinions are never allowed, but to remind fans of the importance of keeping unsolicited opinions in closed circles. By restraining potential hate speech from going public or aimed at the target, the fandom can collectively reduce the amount of hate publicly presented, making the minimum negative remarks easier to digest for the receiver.

As for the fans' perception of the hate-prompting edit, the interviewees deem the production responsible for the content they broadcast, yet ultimately not accountable for the hate speech contestants received. The same concept applies to the contestants. Due to reality television persona becoming an occupation, participants should be aware of their own behavior on screen and the influence of production intervention (Jost, 2010). However, according to the interviewees, no one deserves hate speech, and the only party responsible for the toxicity is the fandom. That being said, educating every single fan on media literacy is undoubtedly not the most cost-efficient way for eliminating hate speech. Therefore, aside from suggesting implementing censoring tools on social media platforms to protect the drag queens, a majority of the respondents suggested the production team incorporate disclaimers or reconciliation scenes in the show instead of calling out toxic fans on social media after the hate has spiraled. Contextualization on social media is an alternative to deal with unpredicted toxicity.

Despite the emphasis on *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom, this research also provides insightful audience perspectives regarding reality television as a genre. Aside from the queerness element of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the appeal to reality television and the potential stimulation of hate speech within television fandoms could be applied in future research for

other reality television shows. It is important to note however that due to the non-probability sampling method practiced, the result presented in this research cannot be considered representative of the whole *RuPaul's Drag Race* fandom. Firstly, most of the interviewees hold a bachelor's degree, with multiple majors in the field of communication. The appeal to dissect production intervention and the ability to appropriately digest one's emotions are therefore not applicable to the fandom as a whole. Secondly, all of the interviewees are either queer people or heterosexual females, leaving heterosexual males' opinions out of the research. Although the demographic group does not serve as the main audience of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, they undoubtedly could still be a part of the fandom, and yield other interesting perspectives. Thirdly, most of the interviewees were either born or living in Europe, with only one interviewee originating from the United States. The lack of American respondents could result in a different understanding of the fandom toxicity due to the varied online participatory culture between continents. Lastly, due to the ongoing pandemic, the researcher was only able to recruit 10 interviewees in total. With a larger sample size, the researcher would be able to more easily identify outliers and yield a more representative result.

For future studies, the researcher suggests conducting in-depth interviews with *RuPaul's Drag Race* fans that have personally spread online hate speech to discover the actual stimulation of toxicity, and whether it matches with fellow fans' assumptions. Personality research of toxic fans could also contribute to identifying the stem points of online hate speech. If applicable, exploring how *RuPaul's Drag Race's* production has changed their production and social media strategies according to the increasing fandom toxicity could also generate interesting insights. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the result presented in this research could also be applied to future research that investigates the fandom toxicity of other reality television shows. The comparison could help reality television fandoms identify their distinctive issues, and provide collective and effective solutions for the commonly despised genre to fight against fandom toxicity, creating an enjoyable yet unharmed playground for all the "opinionated" reality television lovers to express their constructive critiques and relentless trash-talk.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Topic 1: Personal background

1. What is your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. Where do you come from?
4. What is your occupation?
5. How long have you been watching RuPaul's Drag Race?

Topic 2: RuPaul's Drag Race as a Competition Reality Television

1. How would you define reality television?
2. Do you enjoy watching reality television in general? Why or why not?
3. Do you think reality television imposes more opportunities for self-reflection for the audience compared to fictional drama series? Why do you think that?
4. Classified by many scholars as the post-documentary genre, do you think reality television holds social responsibility, or only has to focus on its entertainment value in contrast to documentaries that inform citizens social issues? Why do you think that?
5. What do you think makes *RuPaul's Drag Race* stand out from other reality television?

Topic 3: Structured Narrative and Villain Edit

Show video prompts: The Vixen versus Aquaria in Untucked [Untucked S10E3 04:00-04:23, 04:46-06:12, 07:27-08:52]

1. Do you think reality television is real? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe there is a "villain edit" in regards to *RuPaul's Drag Race*? What makes you say that?
3. Are you aware of the power of the producers (to edit) when watching shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*? Does that come into play with how you perceive the show?
4. What do you find more important to you when watching RPDR: a compelling narrative with crazy drama or fair competition with less melodramatic edits? Why?

Topic 4: Online Hate Speech Circulating in the RPDR Fandom

Show video prompts: Alexis Michelle and Nina Bonina Brown condemning Valentina for not stopping her fans from sending death threats and hate speech [RuPaul's Drag Race S9E13 14:53-15:53]

1. Everyone has his/her own definition of hate speech. How would you define hate speech?
2. Reality television is known for melodramatic fights and arguments. This element is extremely prominent due to the “roast” and “shade” culture amongst drag queens. How do you differentiate shade/reads, critical opinions, and hate speech?
3. How aware are you of the ongoing toxicity circulating within *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* fandom? Why do you think this phenomenon is especially prominent/ or is more brought up in RPDR compared to other reality television?
4. How do you think the ongoing online hate speech will affect the show?
5. Have you ever experienced frustration towards certain contestants on RPDR? How did you manage to express your feelings?
6. What is your opinion on cancel culture? What differences do you perceive between canceling Sherry Pie for being a sexual predator, and sending death threats to Kandy Muse in response to her attitude in the show?
7. Thoughts on censoring social media?

Topic 5: Television Production on Creating Dramas That Stimulate Fandom Toxicity

Show video prompts: Kandy Muse versus Tamisha Iman in Untucked [Untucked S13E5 08:38-09:47]

Show Instagram posts from WoW in response to the Kadny versus Tamisha drama:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CKsILclpxaE/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CKsb7hFrntG/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CKt58EsprgV/>

1. Do you think the production team of RPDR is responsible for the online hate speech contestants such as Kandy Muse have received? Why do you think so? (Or not think so?)
2. Do you think the contestants are responsible for the online hate speech they receive for signing up for a reality television show that values self-exposure and overheated drama? Why do you think (or not think) that?
3. Should reality television producers be more aware of social responsibility? Why or why not?
4. How can production deal with the fandom toxicity while still maintaining the entertainment value of RPDR?

Appendix B: Code Book

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes	
Enjoy figuring out the authenticity	Appeals of reality television	RuPaul's Drag Race viewing experience as a reality television show	
Enjoy stimulation of strong emotions			
Enjoy highly discussable experience			
Enjoy voyeurism			
Enjoy experiencing alternative life			
Enjoy brainless effort			
Deem reality television as hyperreal	Authenticity of reality television		
Deem reality television real in action			
Deem reality television unreal for unseen parts			
Agrees on villain edit existing			
Appreciate villain edits' entertainment value			
Ashamed of enjoying villain edits			
Aware of production after viewing and discussion			
Aware during viewing			
Prioritizes narrative over competition			
Prioritizes competition over narrative			
Experienced self-identification			Self-reflection opportunities of reality television
Self-reflection easier than drama			
Self-reflection more difficult than			

drama		
No self-reflection		
Same social responsibility standard as documentaries	Social responsibility of reality television	
Entertainment over social responsibility		
Defers on platform		
Appreciate discussion of queerness	Appealing features of RuPaul's Drag Race	
Appreciate introduction/deeper understanding of drag		
Appreciate art, creativity		
Appreciate the community/secret code		
Appreciate conversations on controversial topics (with ease)		
Requires target's acceptance/consent	Shade/roast personal definition	
Requires close relationship		
Requires joking sarcasm		
Requires similar power relation		
Requires reasoning with constructive meaning	Critique personal definition	
Requires good intention		
Requires receivers' invitation		
Requires providing solution		
Involves threatening language	Hate speech personal definition	
Involves personal Attack		
Amount matters		
Mannerism matters		
Public or not/targeting		

Receivers' perception		
Fans seeking validation		
Lack of expressive approach		
Online back and forth arguments		
Supporting different contestants		
Lack of accountability		
Insufficient media literacy of audience	Stimulations of hate speech in reality television	
Minority representation		
Woke fanbase		
Stereotypes of queer culture		
Inner divergence of queer culture	Prominence of hate speech in RPRD fandom	
Deem cancel culture as systemic illness		
Provides a sense of justice		
Questions for second chance		
Goes too far too fast	Perception on cancel culture	
Deem production responsible for hate speech		
Deem production responsible for content		
Deem production not responsible for hate speech	Opinions on production's responsibility	
Deem contestants knowing what they signed up for		
Deem contestants responsible for content		
Deem contestants not responsible for hate speech	Opinions on contestants' responsibility	
Agree on censoring		
Against censoring	Opinions on censoring as a solution	Responsibilities and solutions to online hate speech in RPRD fandom

Questions composition/standard		
Freedom has limitation		
Addon censor app		
Acknowledge social media company's power		
Limitation on commenting		
Diversity in production	Additional suggested solutions	
Contextualization on social media		
Incorporate messages/scene in the show		
More expressive channels		
Guidance for contestants		
Less editing (dehumanizing)		
Contestants voicing for clearance		