

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What It Means to be a Drag Queen in Thailand: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Despite its burgeoning popularity in recent years, “drag queen” is a relatively new concept to the Thai public. This qualitative study aims to investigate how the meaning of drag queens in Thailand is being constructed through their narratives and to look into how being drag queens affects their lives, especially regarding the experience of discrimination and abuse. Ten professional drag queens, aged 19 to 34, who based their activities in Thailand, were interviewed via phone calls in semi-structured in-depth interviews. Two participants identified as transwomen, while eight identified as gay. The interview recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were analyzed with a hybrid approach of theoretical and inductive thematic analysis. The participants regarded drag as a form of artistic expression through physical bodies and described four important characteristics of drag queens that they had been constructing through their performativity: (1) the performing element, (2) transformation, (3) over-the-top quality, and (4) individuality. Sexuality was discussed as an important factor in being recognized as a drag queen, with the majority of participants supporting transwomen’s inclusion. The participants’ experiences related to being drag queens were grouped into seven themes: (1) happiness from being drag queens, (2) investing in drag, (3) family acceptance, (4) love lives, (5) discrimination and abuse, (6) drag queens’ limited space, and (7) Thai people’s attitude towards drag queens. Many participants had been rejected by their parents because of their sexuality and/or because they had become drag queens, but all had reconciled prior to the data collection for this study. Most gay participants experienced difficulty in establishing romantic relationships, in which femmephobia seemed to be at play. Despite acknowledging the growing, yet still limited, acceptance from the public in recent years, the participants reported discrimination and verbal harassment against them or their peers in public spaces. Drag queens, by transforming themselves between men and women and combining both masculinity and femininity in their performances, arguably challenge the conventional definition of sexuality and the concept of gender binary. They also seem to challenge the meaning of other sexualities whose definitions have been constructed by expressions of masculinity and/or femininity, especially the traditional concept of gay men.

Keywords: drag queens, sexuality, gender equality, performativity, femmephobia, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI, Thailand

Introduction

It is unclear how the word *drag* has become to describe drag queens, but the earliest record of the term being used to describe “feminine attire worn by men” dates back to 1870 (Farmer & Henley, 1909). Another usage of the term in 1920 was found to describe feminine costumes worn by “homosexual males” during a performance (Gonzales, 2008). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, drag culture was limited primarily to the ballroom community (Dougherty, 2017). In 1990s, the underground ball culture was popularized by mainstream media, such as “Vogue,” an international hit song by Madonna, and *Paris Is Burning*, an American documentary film that portrays the lives of LGBTQI people of color and features ballroom scenes (Clark, 2015). Reality shows and TV series like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Viceland’s *My House*, and *Pose* continued to popularize drag queens and ballroom culture in the 21st century (Bernstein, 2018; Goodman, 2018).

Taylor and Rupp (2004) proposed that transgenderism, same-sex sexuality, and theatrical performance are three primary components that constitute the identity of drag queens in Miami. According to Taylor and Rupp, “not all men who dress as women are drag queens.” Rather, drag queens are gay men who dress up as women without the desire to change their physique to become women (Schacht, 2000; Taylor & Rupp, 2004). Strübel-Scheiner (2011) emphasized that drag queens are not transvestites and described drag queens as male performers who have no aspiration to live as women. However, Taylor and Rupp acknowledged that there were drag queens who changed their bodies to become more like biological women, for example, having breast implants or feminizing hormone therapy.

Historically, there has been a great divide between the transgender and gay communities, and transgender drag queens have not been as well accepted as their gay peers (Berkowitz et al., 2007). Strübel-Scheiner (2011) acknowledged that transwomen can perform as women but did not consider them drag queens. Moreover, many drag queen competitions in the USA had strict eligibility criteria for contestants, including the requirement that contestants be biologically male, have never had any plastic surgery from the neck down, and have never received feminizing hormone therapy (Dougherty, 2017).

Many drag queens experience familial rejection, discrimination, violence, and harassment (Berkowitz & Liska Belgrave, 2010; Hopkins, 2004). In the UK and Canada, it was found that drag queens received negative attitudes from people who valued masculinity or hypermasculinity (Bishop et al., 2014; Davies, 2004). Furthermore, finding serious romantic partners seemed to be a struggle for many drag queens in Florida, USA, even those who were highly respected in their communities (Berkowitz et al., 2007).

Drag Queens in the Thai Context and the Gap of Knowledge

The term *drag queen* is still new to the Thai public but has become more understood in recent years, partly due to the online reality show *Drag Race Thailand* (“*Drag Race Thailand* rian-lí-dtêe sùt rêt jàak sà-hà rát America,” 2018). In Thailand, a similar profession known as “Naang Show” refers to transwoman showgirls in cabaret performances dating back to the 1970s (Suwannaroj, 2013).

There have been attempts by Thai drag queens to distinguish between themselves and Naang Shows, asserting that drag queens live their everyday lives as men but only transform into women during their performances, while Naang Shows live their lives as women both day and night (“*Drag Queen* keu sîn-lá-bpà’ chǎn mâi dtông gaan bpen pòo yǐng!,” 2018; Vitoorut, 2019). This attempt to distinguish between drag queens and Naang Shows in the Thai context is comparable to the division between transgender and gay drag queens in the USA. Nevertheless, there is a Thai drag queen who identifies as a transwoman and has become the first transgender who has won first place in the history of the *Drag Race* franchise (Koaysomboon, 2019). This further highlights the diversity and complexity of drag queens, which may not be able to be categorically distinguished from Naang Shows. Despite the ambiguity in the distinction between drag queens and Naang Shows, the attempt among Thai drag queens to distinguish between the two could be key to understanding how drag queens in Thailand view themselves and understand the term *drag queen*.

Currently, academic literature on drag queens in Thailand is very limited. The only published research article on the topic focused on how contestants in *Drag Race Thailand* presented themselves on the show (Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Kasa, 2020). Consequently,

little is known about the lives of drag queens in Thailand.

In spite of the general perception that Thailand is an LGBTQI-friendly country, studies have found that sexual minorities in Thailand are prone to being victims of discrimination, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Boonmongkon et al., 2014; Kittiteerasack et al., 2021; Sopitarchasak et al., 2017; Suriyasarn, 2014). Studies also found that Thai male-to-female transgender adolescents, gay male adolescents, and gay men were likely to be rejected or victimized by their parents because of their sexuality (Chaivudhi, 2011; Sopitarchasak et al., 2015; Sopitarchasak et al., 2017; Yadegarfarid et al., 2014). When it comes to the public's attitudes toward the LGBTQI population, a recent study based on the national representative data set obtained from the survey conducted by Thailand's National Statistical Office in 2018 found that over one-third of the participants had discriminatory attitudes towards transmen and transwomen, and almost half had discriminatory attitudes against gay men and lesbians (Srimuang & Pholphirul, 2022). Another study in 2017 that analyzed nationally representative data from the World Values Survey found that 39.8% of its respondents did not want homosexuals as their neighbors (Manalastas et al., 2017).

As drag queens are part of the LGBTQI community, it is likely that they are susceptible to abuse and discrimination. It is, thus, worth examining whether and how drag queens in Thailand experience familial rejection, abuse, and discrimination, especially when it might be more complicated for drag queens to conceal their sexual minority status to their families and/or the public as they change into women's attire in drag.

Another form of discrimination that drag queens in Thailand might be susceptible to is femmephobia, a stigmatization against femininity among gay communities. Studies in several countries have found that effeminate gay men are stigmatized and perceived as unattractive in dating scenes (Christian, 2005; García-Gómez, 2020; Hoskin, 2019; Miller, 2015). Although there is currently no research literature that has discussed femmephobia in the Thai context, as drag queens embody femininity in their performances, they may encounter such a double stigma, which can lead to hardship in finding romantic partners, as documented for drag queens in the USA (Berkowitz et al., 2007). Looking into their romantic experiences would give a fuller picture of their lives and shed some light on

the topic of femmephobia among the gay community in Thailand.

The Conceptual Framework

Butler's (2002) theory of gender performativity proposes that gender is performative and does not exist without the performance of people who identify with that gender. When applying the concept of performativity to drag queens, it follows that what is viewed and understood as "drag queens" is actually performative and thus is a result of how people who consider themselves drag queens act. When considering this performativity of drag, looking into the meaning of drag queens in Thailand means we are looking at not only how Thai drag queens view or understand themselves but also how they construct the meaning of drag queens.

This study aims to investigate what it means to be drag queens in Thailand through their own narratives in two aspects: (1) how they understand and construct the meaning of drag queens through the lens of performativity based on Butler's (2002) theory of gender performativity and (2) how they experience life as drag queens and their experiences of discrimination and stigmatization by their parents, potential romantic candidates or partners, and the public, as these are key areas where drag queens and sexual minorities experience discrimination and stigmatization as suggested by the previous literatures mentioned above.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted via semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were carried out between March and April 2020.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The interview framework comprised three sections of questions based on the conceptual framework:

1. Basic personal information (e.g., age, current province of residence, self-identified sexual identity, professions);
2. The meaning of the term *drag queen* in the participants' opinions (e.g., "What does *drag queen* mean in your opinion?," "Can transwomen become drag queens?," and "What are the differences between Naang Shows and drag queens?");

- The participants' experiences in relation to their lives as drag queens (e.g., "What do your parents think about you being a drag queen?," "Do you think being a drag queen makes it harder for you to find a romantic partner?," and "Have you ever felt discriminated against because you are a drag queen?")

Recruitment and Sampling

The current study included people who (1) were 19 years or older, (2) identified as professional drag queens, and (3) based their drag queen activities in Thailand.

The participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling via networks of drag queens in Thailand until the data were saturated and were purposefully selected to cover a varied range of professional years as drag queens, as the number of each participant's professional years might affect their experience. The participants were also purposefully selected to cover both gay and transwoman drag queens. That is because, as trans performers are usually associated with Naang Shows, trans drag queens could potentially provide data regarding what they perceive essentially differentiate themselves from Naang Shows.

The primary investigator approached the participants via social media, that is, Facebook and Instagram, to introduce himself and the study, before briefing about the research in detail through phone calls. After obtaining verbal consent, research information sheets, along with a consent form and a return envelope, were submitted to the participants prior to the interviews via postal mail. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted through phone calls, since face-to-face interviews could not have been conducted due to limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of each interview, each participant was briefed on the objectives of the study as well as the procedure and content of the interview. All participants were informed about their right to refuse to answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time during the study. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and concluded when information saturation was reached.

There was a total of 10 participants in the study. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants'

informed consent. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim into electronic format on Microsoft Word. All names were replaced by codes (Drag Queen 1, Drag Queen 2, Drag Queens 3,... Drag Queen 10) to protect anonymity. The transcripts and interview records were kept in the principal investigator's personal cloud storage accessible only to the principal investigator and another researcher who participated in the analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were systematically analyzed with a hybrid approach of theoretical and inductive thematic analysis. Analysis was first conducted by two researchers (SS and RS) separately with predetermined tentative themes: (1) meaning of drag queens, (2) family acceptance, (3) love lives, and (4) experience of discrimination and violence, while also allowing new themes to emerge inductively. Data were coded, collated, and sorted into themes using Microsoft Excel, with each sheet representing one theme. After each researcher had refined the devised themes and subthemes, their analyses were compared together, and the themes were revised again by refining, combining, dividing, or discarding existing themes. The report was produced after both researchers had agreed on the final analysis.

Ethical Approval

The research protocol for the study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Thammasat University (protocol number: 096/2562).

Results

Demographics

The participants' age range was 21 to 34 years old. Eighty percent of the participants identified themselves as gay, while the rest identified as transwomen. Half of the participants lived in Bangkok.

Fifty percent of the participants had been professional drag queens for less than three years, while 20% had been drag queens for over 10 years (see Table 1). Some participants had worked in cabarets as Naang Shows prior to becoming drag queens. The time periods in which they had worked as Naang Shows were *not* counted as their professional drag queen years.

Table 1*The Participants' Demographics*

Variables		N (%)
Age	20 or under	0 (0)
	21–25	2 (20)
	26–30	3 (30)
	31–35	5 (50)
	35 or over	0 (0)
Sexual identity (self-identified)	Gay	8 (80)
	Transwomen	2 (20)
Province of residence	Bangkok	5 (50)
	Nakhon Pathom	1 (10)
	Chon Buri	1 (10)
	Nakhon Ratchasima	1 (10)
	Phrae	1 (10)
	Phuket	1 (10)
Professional years as drag queens	Less than 3 years	5 (50)
	3–6 years	2 (20)
	6–10 years	1 (10)
	10 years or more	2 (20)

Meanings of Drag and Drag Queens

Most participants described drag as an art form expressed through human bodies, makeup, and ensembles.

“...It’s art. I view drag as an art of freedom. When we talk about art, people tend to think of drawings or paintings where artists express themselves on canvases, but drag is also art. Instead of canvases, we use our bodies.”

(Drag Queen 7)

“Drag queens are artists who can do any kind of performance. We serve looks, costumes, hair and makeup, and performance. It’s a kind of art. Art is not limited to paintings or sculptures. Drag is art presented through our bodies and personalities.”

(Drag Queen 9)

Moreover, most participants mentioned biological sex as an integral part of what it means to be drag queens, asserting that drag queens are male artists dressing up as women, while adding that not all men in women’s attire are drag queens.

“When we talk about drag queens, it’s simply a transformation from men to women. You don’t have to be gay to be a drag queen.”

(Drag Queen 1)

“Heterosexual men can be drag queens. For example, God Susie, he’s a heterosexual drag queen. His drag persona is so big that most Katoey (a Thai term describing effeminate gay or transwomen) can’t even match him.”

(Drag Queen 3)

“Drag queens are men who dress as women. They (drag queens) must be men who dress as women. But ‘drag’ is art.”

(Drag Queen 2)

However, there was a disagreement regarding whether transwomen can be drag queens, with some participants asserting that drag queens can only be heterosexual or gay, while some accepted transwomen as drag queens.

“She’s not a drag queen (referring to a transwoman drag performer). She performs the art of drag.”

(Drag Queen 2)

“Transwomen can be drag queens. Drag is art, and everyone can participate in art.”

(Drag Queen 6)

“(When asked whether transwomen can be drag queens) Yes, anyone can be a drag queen.”

(Drag Queen 7)

Some participants distinguished between drag queens and Naang Shows by their sexuality.

“Most Naang Shows live their lives as women or Katoey. Drag queens live their everyday lives as men or gays.”

(Drag Queen 2)

“In Thailand, ‘Naang Show’ is a nightlife entertainment profession for Katoey. Drag queens are men who dress as women.”

(Drag Queen 8)

“Naang Shows are Katoeys. So, they’re supposed to have breasts, right? They usually wear costumes with plumage or bikinis, like what you usually see in cabaret shows.”

(Drag Queen 5)

One participant discussed how the definition of drag queens has evolved over time, noting that transwomen in Thailand used to perform as Naang Shows in cabaret groups but now more transwomen are incorporating the art of drag into their performance, rather than just dressing up to look like women, which is common among Naang Shows.

“In the past, we didn’t think that transwomen could be drag queens, but things have changed. Now, more and more transwomen with their breast implants want to be drag queens. And I won’t dismiss their opportunities.”

(Drag Queen 5)

Another participant considered time and space to be important factors in determining what drag means.

“For me, it’s also about time and space. Look at Dita Von Teese. She’s a burlesque dancer. She goes all the way with her costumes. She wears a corset. Her costumes are so sexy. She wears a lot of makeup. But she’s a burlesque dancer, performing in a cabaret, so we don’t think of her as a drag or bio queen despite the fact that her performance is so drag. On the contrary, if a woman who dresses up and wears makeup like a drag queen, performs in a gay club or any queer space, we might consider her a bio queen.”

(Drag Queen 1)

Thai Culture and Drag

Some participants noted that drag performances have existed in the Thai culture for a long time, but there was no terminology to define such performers, and that all men who perform as women have been called by a blanket term, *Naang Show*. And it was only after drag culture from the west was popularized in Thailand that the term *drag* was used in Thailand to describe drag performances.

“Back then, all men who performed dressing up as women were called ‘Naang Show’, but when white tourists saw us, they would call us drag queens, while Thai people would call us ‘Naang Show’.”

(Drag Queen 5)

“I just came to know what drag is about 3-5 years ago when I first watched Rupaul’s Drag Race (season 1 and 5). Although, prior to that, I had always been dressing up as a woman.”

(Drag Queen 6)

“I was asked to join a performance team, and that was the point when I started to learn about drag. But back then there was no terminology to define what we did. People didn’t use the word ‘drag’.”

(Drag Queen 7)

A participant mentioned other types of local performances that are similar to drag but are not considered drag, such as *Siang-Isan*, a comedic musical band in which some male performers crossdress as women, and *Hor Taew Taek*, a franchise of Thai films in which main characters crossdress as women.

“People think of drag queens as queens who have the western look. But when you look at Hor Taew Taek, what they did in the movie was drag culture all along. But nobody considered it a drag. This film director has been portraying drag culture for years. I grew up watching it. It’s drag, but people just don’t call them drag queens.”

(Drag Queen 1)

Characteristics of Drag Queens

Although the participants regarded artistic expression, biological sex (male), and sexuality as crucial parts to what it means to be a drag queen, not all artists who use their bodies as a medium are considered drag queens. Nor are all male performers who crossdress.

The participants’ responses regarding important characteristics of drag queens could be grouped into four themes: (1) the performing element, (2) transformation, (3) over-the-top quality, and (4) individuality.

(1) The performing element

One of the most important elements that constitute drag queens is their performance. Drag queens’ performances are not limited to lip-syncing shows, although they might be central to the image that people remember about drag queens.

“Drag queens perform for money. We perform at clubs. There needs to be an element of theater or audience participation to it (performance).”

(Drag Queen 2)

“Drag queens do not necessarily perform on stage. Like Kim Chi (a Korean-American drag queen), she doesn’t usually perform on stage. She poses for magazines. And she’s a drag queen. You see, stage performances are not necessary.”

(Drag Queen 1)

“You can be a drag queen and do anything. You don’t have to perform on stage. You can be a public speaker in drag.”

(Drag Queen 8)

(2) Transformation

Transforming oneself from male to female through costumes or makeup is a crucial element of drag queens. This might take the form of transforming into famous pop stars or other artistic or bizarre looks. In addition to physical and visual transformations, the participants reported transforming their persona, usually into a more daunting and powerful fashion.

“There must be an element of transformation to make it drag.”

(Drag Queen 2)

“Drag queens are men who can change their looks and transform into whatever they want, from men to women, from me to Beyoncé or Britney, or whoever they want to impersonate, or even into more bizarre things.”

(Drag Queen 5)

“People say that I’m a totally different person

when I'm in drag. My personality would become so big and I would feel like I can do many things I dare not do when I'm out of drag. Being a drag makes me feel powerful. When I'm in drag, I have more power and I can do things that attract people's attention."

(Drag Queen 3)

"I'm usually sensitive and demure when I'm a man. But in drag, I'd become fierce and crazy. It's like I can let my emotions out. When I dress boyish, I have to suppress it. But in drag, I'm emancipated."

(Drag Queen 10)

"I'd become confident, more than 100%. When I dress as a woman, I'd really become confident. You may ask me to do anything and I'd do it, if there's no harm, of course (laugh)."

(Drag Queen 5)

(3) Over-the-top quality

Another distinctive quality of drag queens, according to many participants, is being over-the-top with exaggerated makeup and costumes.

"When we talk about drag queens, we're talking about transformations into totally different characters that are over-the-top. It starts with transforming men into women, so you'd need makeup and many more things for people to be able to see that we have become a different person."

(Drag Queen 1)

"You need to be more creative than usual. For instance, if I want to perform a Beyoncé song, as a drag queen, it must go beyond what Beyoncé actually is, unless the client wants me to copy her exactly. But if it's up to me, then it needs to go beyond the mundane, beyond imagination."

(Drag Queen 5)

that differentiates between drag queens and Naang Shows, in that drag queens are usually larger-than-life and it is not as important for drag queens to pass as women or to get closer to women's beauty standards as it is for Naang Shows.

"Naang Shows would make themselves look beautiful as women. Drag queens are different. They're over-the-top and their goals are not to imitate women. When people look at us, they'll know that we're not dressing as women, but that it's a parody of women to the tenth degree. For example, women's usual eye makeup might be one centimeter, but I'd exaggerate it to 20 centimeters. The performances might be similar, but drag queens' performances would be more innovative, more creative, different, and supernatural."

(Drag Queen 9)

"Naang Shows are Katoeys. So, they're supposed to have breasts, right? They usually wear costumes with plumage or bikinis, like what you usually see in cabaret shows. In my opinion, those are Naang Shows. Drag queens are men who can change their looks and transform into whatever they want, from men to women, from me to Beyoncé or Britney, or whoever they want to impersonate, or even into more bizarre things. This is what I think is different between the two."

(Drag Queen 5)

However, a participant mentioned that although being over-the-top is an important quality, it is not necessary for all drag queens to be over-the-top.

"We all have our individuality. Some drag queens can look incredibly like women that you can't even tell. Who are we to judge that they're not drag queens just because they're not over-the-top?"

(Drag Queen 1)

This over-the-top quality was mentioned as a factor

(4) Individuality

The participants regarded individuality as an important quality of drag queens that differentiates between them and Naang Shows. The participants reported two aspects of individuality. Firstly, drag queens can perform individually, whereas Naang Shows usually perform in a cabaret group. Secondly, while performances in Naang Show cabaret groups are usually created by a show director, drag queens bring more of their individuality into their performances, by designing their own looks and performances.

“Drag queens can perform alone, but if you perform in a cabaret, there must be another performer or a whole ensemble around you with a big set on a stage.”

(Drag Queen 7)

“(talking about cabaret performances) Show directors create the whole show. They pick the performers, create the sets, and are responsible for producing everything in the show. Everything is up to them. You may pitch your idea, but it’s still up to them.”

(Drag Queen 8)

“When it comes to drag queens, there is more individuality. You transform yourself into whatever you want. You do the whole process yourself. You come up with your own idea. But this is not necessarily the case for Naang Shows. There’re show directors and choreographers who come up with their ideas for the show. For me, that’s the distinction between Naang Shows and drag queens. Individuality is not needed for Naang Shows.”

(Drag Queen 1)

The Life of a Drag Queen

The participants shared stories of their lives as drag queens, which have been grouped into seven themes: (1) happiness from being drag queens, (2) investing in drag, (3) family acceptance, (4) love lives, (5) discrimination and abuse, (6) drag queens’

limited space, and (7) Thai people’s attitude towards drag queens.

(1) Happiness from being a drag queen

All of the participants expressed how happy they are to be drag queens and how important it is to keep doing drag despite the high cost and the social discrimination they face.

“I love to perform. Being on stage with an audience watching me makes me happy. I can either sing live or lip-sync. I don’t care. I’m so happy when I’m on stage, performing for people. And I don’t think you can buy this kind of feeling. You cannot go to department stores and buy happiness, can you?”

(Drag Queen 4)

“I studied acting and directing in college. I’m happy that there are spaces for us to perform whatever we envision in our minds. There’re not so many opportunities to perform. If you produce your own play, that means you’d have to pay just to get to perform. But to perform drag, you don’t need to pay. They pay me to perform weekly, and nobody is forcing me to do anything. I can perform whatever I want. I get to create new shows every month. I’m happy.”

(Drag Queen 1)

(2) Investing in being a drag queen

The participants mentioned investing in dresses, costumes, and wigs, although sometimes the cost would exceed their earnings from the show. The happiness of being drag queens and work ethics were regarded as reasons why they invested a lot in drag.

“When people come to see me, I want to give them the best I can. You don’t earn a lot from being a drag queen. You might even lose your money. If you don’t love it, you cannot do it. For instance, if I’m hired for 5,000 baht, I may spend 5,000 baht on a dress and more on the props that could bring the total to 6,000 baht. But if my audience smiles, laughs, applauds, or if someone comes up to me and says, ‘Thank

you, you made me so happy today,' then I'm already happy."

(Drag Queen 9)

"It's not only about the money. It feels good when you go out on the stage and people scream in awe of how you look. I feel successful when I perform, and people seem to be interested in what I do."

(Drag Queen 7)

Some participants also talked about how they manage their money in order to survive financially while keeping being creative. This includes walking for tips, sharing expenses between jobs, and creating income from other businesses.

"That's why some drag queens do the same show again and again. That's why we're eager for tips. It's because some of us only have one profession. Tips are what sustain them."

(Drag Queen 3)

"If we invest once (in dresses or props), there might be other jobs that we can use them again, then we might break even or make a profit."

(Drag Queen 7)

"I also have a dress rental business, so I'm lucky that I already have dresses. Or even if I have to make a new dress, it can be put in my store afterwards and I can make more money out of it."

(Drag Queen 5)

(3) Family acceptance

Some participants said their sexuality and being drag queens had not been accepted by their family members before, but all acknowledged more acceptance from their families in recent years.

"At first, they did not support me (to do drag), but now they do. My mom didn't want to see me when I dressed up as a woman. She wouldn't

show up to see me perform. But I kept going because it makes me happy."

(Drag Queen 2)

"At first, no. When I was in high school, my dad would say 'I don't want to see you walk with those Thud (a Thai term for effeminate gays or transwomen), or I'd kick you.' But as I grew up, it got better. When he first saw me dress up as a woman, he was alright with it. He said on the show that he was proud of me. That made me so happy."

(Drag Queen 3)

"People from previous generations have a negative attitude towards the entertainment industry. He (father) did not like it. He did not support me. And I think it was because he was a military officer. He wanted his son to be a man and become a military officer too. But there was nothing he could do about it. I'd avoid him so that we'd not fight. If I knew he was coming home, I'd get out of the house before he arrived."

(Drag Queen 7)

Nonetheless, some participants reported being accepted and supported by their families since the beginning.

"My family didn't oppose me (doing drag), because I've been doing it since I was a kid. They would see me crossdressing. When I was young, I'd take my mom's dresses, wigs, and makeup, and try them on. So, when I started doing drag, it wasn't that different from what I'd been doing. Of course, it got more over-the-top with drag and because I became an adult now. When I was younger, I'd do less makeup. I wore wigs only occasionally. They've seen my evolution. They don't say anything about it. I think they're already used to it."

(Drag Queen 6)

"I'm really lucky that I have lovely parents. They don't forbid me. They give me tremendous

supports. It really makes me happy. I studied fashion design. And my family is in clothing manufacturing industry. So, I've got a lot of knowledge from them. And whenever I ask for help, they always support me fully. I have more advantages than people who are from families where their parents forbid them from doing certain things...I am very lucky that they support me."

(Drag Queen 9)

(4) Love lives

The participants mentioned getting rejected in romantic relationships after candidates or partners realized they were drag queens. Femmephobia was regarded as the cause of such rejections.

"I talk to someone on Tinder occasionally. But usually it lasts a month, or a week or two. Then, they're gone. It's ok though. Recently, I'd give them my Instagram immediately. If they decide to disappear, that's fine. I'm not going to quit my job. They don't pay my rent. (Interviewer: 'So you do think that they stop talking to you after they knew that you do drag?') Of course, and it certainly happens a lot. It's like, 'Oh, he crossdresses. He's femme.' Well, I'm actually femme (laugh). Why do we gays discriminate against being femme? Can you only be femme if you're pretty? Can you not look like a beast and be femme? I don't get it."

(Drag Queen 1)

"When I first got into the entertainment industry, I was serving the masculine look. There were guys who wanted to date me. But when I started doing drag, they were all gone. But I still have people who want to date me. They're just different kinds of people. There're also people who want to date me even after they know I do drag, but tell me not to meet them in drag because they don't want to see it. I'd say no to those because drag is my profession. If you cannot accept me when I do drag, then we cannot be together."

(Drag Queen 3)

"I'm pretty masculine. So, when I was with my ex, I had to lie to him when I went out to do my job (as a drag queen). He was suspicious because he saw my eyes were black from makeup, and I worked until late at night. My eyeliners were not all cleaned...Eventually some of them found out. Some even came to my show, got on the front row and cried while watching me perform. He loved me, but he was shocked and couldn't take it. With my current boyfriend, I did the same in the beginning, until he saw my stockings and high-heels in the back of my car. So, he asked. And I came clean. He was the first one who could accept me."

(Drag Queen 5)

However, the other participants did not regard being drag queens as an obstacle in romantic relationships, explaining that they are not targets for romantic relationships in the mainstream gay community because they are feminine or chubby.

"There're people who like chubby guys. They're a different group of people. Mainstream gays usually like slim guys. Fit people like fit people. But there are also people who like fat people. I might be lucky that I know my people (laugh). I won't go to Silom (a gay nightlife area) to look for a guy. It's hard, almost impossible. I need to find my own market. Somebody once said that there're customers for all kinds of products. There must be someone who likes me. Finding a boyfriend is not hard for me, compared to other people."

(Drag Queen 6)

"It's not relevant to me...I'm transgender. So being drag does not affect my romantic relationships. I'm not a masculine gay guy dragging. I'm already a subtype. If I were [a masculine gay guy], it might have been hard."

(Drag Queen 8)

(5) Discrimination and abuse

The participants talked about negative experiences related to being drag queens, including discrimination and verbal abuse, which usually occurred when they were in public or nonqueer spaces.

“We’re usually discriminated against by people who’re not in our social circle. I once got a job to distribute pamphlets and emcee for an event held by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and people were looking at me like I was strange. Somebody told their kid not to get too close to me. But I didn’t care. I just walked away.”

(Drag Queen 5)

“I saw her (another drag queen) encounter a hateful incident once. She was singing, and a customer started shouting at her, ‘What are you doing here, fag?’ If I were her, I’d feel humiliated too. She’s a singer who does impersonations, so her audience is diverse (and includes people who are not familiar with drag queens). I work in gay clubs, so those people are filtered out, and the ones who’re there are the ones who really want to see our shows.”

(Drag Queen 7)

(6) Drag queens’ limited space

The participants related the discrimination and abuse to spaces where they happened, pointing out that drag queens have limited space to express themselves and are more likely to experience derogation when they are not in an LGBTQI-friendly space.

“People would look at us. If the job we got was in public, people who’re not familiar with drag queens or don’t know what drag queens are, especially ones from the rural areas, would be startled by us. I understand them though. If you think about it, drag queens usually get booked for work in nightclubs, mostly in Bangkok or other provinces with nightlife scenes like Phuket, Pattaya, or Chiangmai.”

(Drag Queen 3)

“(talking about another drag queen who

was shouted at) It was at an event held in a department store. People were diverse. I think I’m luckier than others that I got to work in our safe space, so I’ve never encountered that myself.”

(Drag Queen 7)

(7) Thai people’s attitude towards drag queens

Most participants felt that Thai people are generally more accepting of drag queens than they were previously, but that approval is still limited to a small group of Thai people.

“The society is much more open than it was previously. But it’s not like everyone everywhere knows what drag queens are. But I understand that you cannot rush this kind of change. Like gender diversity, it took decades for them to accept us like they do today. Drag might have to wait too.”

(Drag Queen 3)

“Some people love us a lot. They’re crazy about us and have been loving us all along. They look at us and see art. But there’re also people who try to shut us down. They try to close our doors left and right, back and front. They won’t let us grow. They try to limit us to a narrow space and cage us. ...I think there’re two kinds of people. People who accept us and people who regard us as freaks or clowns.”

(Drag Queen 5)

“It’s still limited to only certain groups. If you ask older people whether they know what drag queens are, they’ll tell you they don’t. Some only know drag queens as people who put on fancy costumes.”

(Drag Queen 9)

“Some people don’t like [drag queens]. Some people love [drag queens]. People who don’t like us might look down on us. They don’t understand what we wear or why we are so extra. They think we look scary like monsters. They might not understand why we use bold colors on our

eyelids because people don't usually do it. Mostly, I see those kinds of comments on social media. There is also another group of people who like drag queens a lot. They view drag as art, as something beautiful."

(Drag Queen 4)

Discussion

According to Butler's gender performativity concept, gender is what is repeatedly performed, which constructs the very identity of gender itself (Butler, 2002). In other words, any gender is defined by the performances, expressions, and actions of a group of people who identify with that gender. Consequently, the definition of any gender identity would be constantly changing as people's performance evolves over time.

Although *drag queen* is not a gender identity, the concept of *performativity* can help us understand how the term *drag queen* in Thailand has been given its meaning. Through the lens of performativity, *drag queen* has been given its meaning through the performance, expressions, and actions of those who consider themselves drag queens.

Traditionally, *drag queens* are defined as male performers in women's attire who have no desire to physically become women or live like one (Strübel-Scheiner, 2011). Nonetheless, the very existence of trans drag queens in Thailand and around the globe is challenging and reshaping such conventional definitions of drag queens, as reflected in the data from this study, which indicated that there were conflicting opinions on the subject matter, with most participants showing acceptance of trans drag queens while a few disagreed. Additionally, one of the participants remarked that she had not thought that transwomen could become drag queens, but as she has seen more trans drag queens who have the significant characteristics of drag queens, she has now accepted the idea that transwomen can become drag queens. The phenomenon reflected the dynamics of the constructed meaning of drag queens, which may change over time under the ever-changing dynamics of performativity.

As trans drag queens were included in this study, a concern was raised that the results of the study regarding the topic of drag queens' sexuality would be influenced by the transgender participants in a direction

that would favor transwomen being accepted as drag queens. However, even when considering the data from the gay participants alone, the result stayed unchanged as most of the gay participants accepted the idea that transwomen can become drag queens. Nevertheless, and most importantly, it is not the objective of this study to discuss whether transwomen should or should not be accepted as drag queens. What is important here is the participants' view on the topic, which would reflect how they understand and construct the meaning of drag queens.

According to the data in this study, four important characteristics of drag queens were identified: (1) the performing element, (2) transformation, (3) over-the-top quality, and (4) individuality. The first two characteristics were in line with a study by Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Kasa (2020) that stated that drag queens in *Drag Race Thailand* presented drag queens as a form of art (performativity) and that they also presented drag queens as women (transformation, in the sense of transforming oneself from men to women). However, "transformation" in this study has a broader meaning in that it involves transformation of one's persona, usually to be bolder and more empowered, which goes in line with the study by Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Kasa (2020), which found that the drag queens presented themselves as competent and powerful. Being over-the-top and being individualistic were considered important for drag queens' performances, as also highlighted in other studies in which drag queens' costumes were described as outlandish or exaggerated (Kan, 2000; Taylor & Rupp, 2004).

Although these four factors (the performing element, transformation, over-the-top quality, and individuality) were not requirements for all drag queens, they were significant elements for one to be considered a drag queen and differentiated drag queens from other crossdressing performers such as Naang Shows. Taking into consideration performativity based on Butler's (2002) gender performativity, drag queens in Thailand did not simply "have" these characteristics. Rather, they have been constructing the meaning of drag queens by performing and transforming themselves into something outrageous and reflecting their individual creativity.

When looking at the dynamic of the definition of drag queens through the lens of performativity based on Butler's (2002) gender performativity, we would see that when drag culture was first introduced to Thailand,

there were only crossdressing performers with western looks who identified themselves as drag queens, possibly due to the fact that drag culture originated in the USA (Dougherty, 2017). Consequently, the definition of drag queens was solely up to their performativity. However, as there is now more diversity in the performances of people who identify as drag queens, the territory of what it means to be a drag queen has expanded accordingly.

The Life of Drag Queens

Many participants' parents had not accepted their profession as a drag queen or their sexuality. Despite family rejection in the beginning, all participants with such experience had continued on their drag queen journey, and their families are now more accepting of both their profession as a drag queen and their sexuality. According to the findings of this study, formerly unaccepting family members began to accept the participants after they had achieved professional success, such as winning a renowned drag queen competition. In this context, success might function in the same way as what Stone (2021) called "comfort work," strategic actions taken by LGBTQI adult children to ameliorate their parents' negative prejudice towards sexual minorities and create comfort for them. Although it was not investigated in this study whether the participants' intention was to deliberately comfort their parents with their success, it is possible that success helped manage their parents' emotional distress.

Such hypothesis would go in line with the previously reported belief among the LGBTQI population in Thailand that they must work harder than the average non-LGBTQI people and gain some success to earn the respect of their parents or others around them (De Lind van Wijngaarden & Ojanen, 2016; Sopitarchasak et al., 2015; Suriyasarn, 2014). Alternately, success might merely help family members *express* their acceptance more easily, as it might create an opportunity for parents to reach out to their children. Additionally, Thailand's more welcoming attitude toward gender diversity in recent years may have helped the participants' parents in showing their support more easily. Nonetheless, due to the qualitative nature of this study, no connections or causal relationships could be established between parents' acceptance and other factors, such as their children's successes or the social climate toward gender diversity in general.

In romantic relationships, many participants

reported that they were rejected by potential romantic partners after the partners found out they were drag queens, and femmephobia was regarded as the cause of the rejections. This finding was in line with a study of drag queens in Florida, USA, by Berkowitz et al. (2007), in which it was found that many drag queens struggled to establish serious romantic relationships. Nevertheless, the other participants did not think that being drag queens makes it more difficult for them to establish romantic relationships because, as they were transwomen, femme, or overweight, they were never targets for romantic relationships among mainstream gay communities in the first place. Such a phenomenon further supports the hypothesis that femmephobia might play a role in romantic struggles among drag queens, as only drag queens who passed as masc gays when they were out of drag and whose masculinity was valued were romantically rejected after they were found out to be drag queens, a profession in which femininity is heightened. This isn't to suggest that femmephobia didn't affect the love lives of trans or femme gay drag queens. Rather, regardless of whether or not they were drag queens, femmephobia seemed to limit their romantic options.

The participants in this study informed that they had been discriminated against and verbally abused, especially when they were outside of queer spaces. This may have influenced the participants' perceptions of Thai people's attitudes toward drag queens, as almost all of them believed drag queens were becoming more accepted by the general public, but that acceptance was still limited to a small group of Thai people. Such findings were in accordance with previous studies that indicated that sexual minorities in Thailand were susceptible to discrimination and various forms of abuse (Boonmongkon et al., 2014; Kittiteerasack et al., 2021; Sopitarchasak et al., 2017; Suriyasarn, 2014). According to two analyses based on different nationally representative datasets of the Thai population, it was found that more than one-third of their survey respondents had homonegative attitudes (Manalastas et al., 2017; Srimuang & Pholphirul, 2022) and that older age (Manalastas et al., 2017; Srimuang & Pholphirul, 2022), lack of higher education, and higher religiosity (Manalastas et al., 2017) were predictors of homonegativity. None of the participants reported being physically abused.

Studies in the UK and Canada have found that

people who valued masculinity or hypermasculinity were prone to hold negative attitudes towards gay men or drag queens, as gay men's and drag queens' self-expression goes against their heteronormative sexual norm (Bishop et al., 2014; Davies, 2004). An account by *Drag Queen 7* in the current study reflected such a tendency as their father, who was a former military officer, a male-dominated profession, whose pervasive masculinist culture is known to oppress sexual minorities (Bjarnegård & Melander, 2011), expressed his disapproval towards his son, who chose to be a drag queen performer. However, due to the qualitative nature of this study, we could not ascertain the association between male-dominated professions and drag queen rejection.

Despite discrimination, abuse, familial rejection, and difficulty in establishing romantic relationships, the participants discussed happiness in being drag queens and discussed joyful experiences when they received positive responses from the audience and regarded these as important factors that keep them doing drag. Such joy in their profession was also reflected in the way they invested in costumes and makeup even when the cost surpassed what they earned for the job.

Challenging the Conventional Meaning of Sexuality

Salih (2007) discussed how in some cases, drag queens may reinforce heteronormativity, giving the crossdressing roles of Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Tootsie* and Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire* as examples of the argument. Salih (2007) argued that both roles reproduced stereotypical myths of differences between men and women and between being gay and being straight. In addition, Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Kasa (2020) argued that drag queens' self-presentation as women meant they yielded to the narrative of gender binary.

However, when we consider the lives of drag queens as a whole, which includes the time when they are out of drag, we see the fluidity of their gender expression, as they transform themselves between men and women.

I argue that, rather than reinforcing them, such fluidity in gender expression calls into question the conventional meaning of sexuality and the gender binary, in which men and women are expected to have specific and thus limited ways of expressing

their gender. Additionally, when looking at how drag queens express themselves in their performances, we see that they are not merely imitating how women dress according to social norms, as mentioned by the participants in this study, but rather combining things considered masculine and feminine, further challenging the gender tradition. Such drag queen performances may serve to educate and raise the questions about gender norms among the audience and may potentially disrupt heteronormativity narratives (Rupp et al., 2010).

Apart from challenging heteronormativity and gender binary narratives, drag queens challenge the conventional meaning of other sexualities, especially gays. As the term *gay* in the Thai context generally refers to men who are attracted to men but have no desire to physically look like women (Juntrasook et al., 2021), the existence of drag queens, who self-identify as gays but transform into women in drag, is posing a question and pushing the boundary of the definition of being gay in Thailand. It may also prompt the society to question the meaning of other sexualities that have been defined by their expressions of masculinity or femininity.

Conclusion

According to the study, drag queens in Thailand have been constructing the meaning of drag queens through performing and transforming themselves into something over-the-top that represents their individualistic artistry, which serves to distinguish them from Naang Shows. Although there was no consensus on whether or not transwomen can be drag queens, most participants were in favor of the inclusivity of transwomen. Nonetheless, the answer to the question "What does it mean to be a drag queen?" changes dynamically in consonance with the diversity of people who identify as drag queens and how they perform, express, or act. Further research into drag queens should seek not to establish a specific definition of drag queens but rather to understand the dynamics of the meaning, which may vary between people and change over time.

Experiences of rejection by parents, struggles in romantic relationships, and discrimination varied among the participants. Some participants experienced disapproval from their parents because of their

sexuality and/or because they chose to become drag queens, but all had reconciled with their parents prior to the data collection of this study. Many gay drag queens experienced struggles in romantic relationships, in which femmephobia seemed to play an important role. Overall, the participants stated that they had experienced or witnessed discrimination against them or their peers, while also acknowledging the public's growing, yet still limited, acceptance in recent years.

Potential Contributions

This study contributed to the currently limited knowledge about drag queens in Thailand. It was the first to explore how they constructed the meaning of drag queens as well as the dynamics of it. It was the first study to look into the lives of Thai drag queens, which once again called attention to the long-standing homonegativity in Thailand and revealed how femmephobia might be at play in creating double stigma for femme gays and transwomen in Thailand, a topic which has not been explored or documented before in earlier studies.

Limitations

In the current study, only people who identified as drag queens were interviewed. However, investigating other groups of people who might not identify as drag queens but hold similar characteristics, such as Naang Shows, may provide valuable insights for how we interpret and understand drag queens and their experience. The study did not directly investigate experiences of drag queens' family members, romantic partners, and friends, resulting in limitations in interpreting some of the findings in this study, for example, family acceptance, difficulty in romantic relationships, or social prejudice and discrimination. Further studies that look into the experiences of these people shall provide a better understanding of these issues.

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