Locating Regional Cultures of Drag in Medium-Sized English Cities: An Ethnographic Case Study of Nottingham's Drag Scene

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the complex socioeconomic dimensions of regional drag performance scenes based in the Midlands through investigations of performers' experiences and the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies into their practices. Shifting academic focus away from drag in metropolitan contexts to less-studied lesser-metropolitan contexts, the thesis utilises a methodological framework that combines (i) ethnographic interviews with local drag performers, (ii) participant observations, and (iii) social media analysis, and is framed by the case study of the mid-sized city of Nottingham's drag scene.

The project poses that for local drag performers, the threats to their financial and occupational survival are heightened due to their local socioeconomic and geographic contexts. Therefore, local performers are forced to adopt entrepreneurial strategies in efforts to better situate their position in the hierarchies and economies that construct their drag scene. This thesis explores the entrepreneurial strategies that performers employ both in and around their local drag scene and on virtual social media platforms, and their socioeconomic effect on performers' personal and occupational lives. Performers' entrepreneurialism, here, seeks to grow their reputational growth, bolster their self-brands, and allows them to compete in oversaturated markets that already offer scarce employment opportunity.

Nottingham's once rich queer cultural history has eroded over time through the persistent closure of independent queer venues in its night-time economy. Yet, Nottingham houses a complex and culturally rich drag scene which is highlighted by the abundance of drag performers still showcasing their artistry due to an ever-increasing popularity and demand for drag in the city. This project maintains a particular focus on the financial survival of both Nottingham's drag scene and the performers who construct it, within a local night-time economy accommodating a very limited number of permanent LGBTQIA+-specific safe spaces. Despite the current popularity of drag facilitated by the drag publics generated by *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and an arguably more accepting society, precarity and occupational instability continue to be crucial challenges for local performers to overcome. However, the local demand elicited through this lack of queer representation and visibility in Nottingham's night-time economy has been opportunistically met by bars and event spaces owned by corporate and heteronormative chains. These non-queer spaces infrequently hold LGBTQIA+ events to profit from that demand. This neoliberal opportunism raises further issues for Nottingham's local drag scene around queer safety and financial opportunity. Yet, in their navigation of this night-time economy and proactive facilitation of performance opportunities, local drag performers work towards a reclamation of the lost safe queer-spaces of Nottingham, and attempt to re-queer the city.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

‘I walk out of Nottingham's Royal Concert Hall in a mass of giggling, drunkenly slurring people who vary massively in age, sex, and visible sexuality. They are all geared up from watching the high-budget and polished *RuPaul's Drag Race UK Season Two Tour,* from their expensive seats, starring the hugely popular cast and most recent season winner. Aside from the main clusters of people standing waiting for taxis, and googling different bars to visit, a smaller but steady stream of people exit the venue and work their way through the crowd following a familiar route. I follow the group. It consists of both excitable people, as well as drag artists who had watched the show fully dressed and glammed (who now lead the line hurriedly). We arrive at the *Revolucion de Cuba* bar. Our identification is checked by two suited bouncers, and we enter the main downstairs bar. Some regulars, in groups and pairs that occupy every metre of the floor space and do not seem to be visibly queer, look us up and down whilst obviously shaking their heads and whispering to the peers. We walk upstairs, where the upbeat music shifts dramatically to the blasting of transgender artist Kim Petras' overtly sexual and queer anthem *'Treat Me Like a Slut'.* I pay five pounds and have my hand stamped by a friendly individual wearing drag-inspired makeup and a huge red wig, and I enter a much smaller bar area than downstairs. A local drag performer, donned in a rhinestoned body suit complete with feathered shoulders and long blonde hair strolls across the small dancefloor, fiddling with small and cheap-looking transportable lighting and microphone stands. They hand their phone to a couple and ask for them to take several pictures of them posing, showcasing their artistry. At least one of these images was posted on their Instagram profile the following morning. A group of 7 other drag artists sit in a booth drinking, chatting, and laughing. The room is reasonably full of queer-presenting individuals who are chatting and mingling between groups. The blonde-haired queen in the glimmering body suit, our host for the night it transpires, manually lowers the lights and hits play on a laptop. They are the first of three acts to perform tonight. Our host opens the show to cheers, applause, and hollers from the audience during their high-energy lip sync to a chart-topping Dua Lipa song, hair-flipping, and death-dropping throughout. They take a breath and introduce the next act who is in a simple green gown, with vivid red hair and matching red lip and the microphone before them. They perform a 1960s ballad, influencing the audience to move and sway along. The third is a comedy act, inflicting harsh cusses and insults upon the audience and the other performers sat in the booth. After the performance, the floor opens and performers and audience merge into one eclectic unit. Drinks fly, people dance, and the room is electric. This is a local Nottingham drag show, or rather the very unofficial *Drag Race* Tour After Party…'   (06/04/2022 *Nottingham City Centre*)

Despite its longstanding presence in queer communities worldwide, scholarly and public interest in drag has surged dramatically over the past decade. This surge aligns with drag's heightened visibility and increased global consumption, propelling it from the margins of counterculture and into the mainstream.

This thesis emerges from my disillusionment with the existing approaches to studying drag in academic discourse. Whilst acknowledging the breadth and significance of existing scholarly work on drag, this work contends that numerous experiential viewpoints and focal points remain overlooked across various research domains. The thesis aims to address some of these omissions. However, before delving into these lacunae, it is pertinent to briefly acknowledge the existing perspectives and focuses found in literature. This introductory step sets the stage for a more comprehensive exploration of the topic in the subsequent literature review sections of this thesis (Chapter 2).

Butler's feminist work in the late 1990s catalysed explorations on the nature and importance of drag through her discussions of its power to clearly expose the performativity of gender, which relies on socially inscribed cultural codes and repetitive/shared behaviours (Butler, 1999). Whilst Butler utilises drag performance as a tool with which to highlight their discussions on gender performativity and destabilising the 'truth' of gender identity (Butler, 1999), those discussions alongside the increased public consumption of drag (through media like *RuPaul's Drag Race*) sparked an influx of debates, academic conversation, and analyses around the subject. A central theme that has emerged throughout fields of gender, queer, and cultural studies is the much-discussed concept of drag's newfound hypervisibility and its ontological ties to neoliberalism, usually debated as a consequence of the social phenomena highlighted through the popularity and globalisation of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Some even argue that 'today's drag culture' has become 'celebrified, professionalised, commercially viable, brand-orientated and mainstream' in which the 'logic of individualism, competition and the market' has and continues to infiltrate drag as a performance form and its enactors' approach to the form (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 386-7).

Sociologically-framed research focusing on drag aids us in developing a deeper comprehension of its nuances and delves into its social dimensions, including: (i) the creation of 'social networks […[[within] the drag world' (Knutson et al., 2017), (ii) its role in empowering marginalised individuals and advancing collective freedom of expression for specific marginalised groups (Hopkins, 2004), (iii) its disruption of gender norms (Taylor and Rupp, 2004), and (iv) its impact on the psychological and emotional experiences of its performers (Knutson et al., 2018). Notably, the latter study is significant as it employs robust sociological methodology to engage with drag participants on a larger scale. However, whilst this approach provides insight into the psychological experiences of participants, it lacks depth in exploring other cultural aspects, such as the social lives of performers and their perceptions of the industry they contribute to.

Elsewhere, other research critiques the current drag industry and its potential impacts on the surrounding contexts and individuals involved. For example, some argue that drag undermines

feminist values and perpetuates a 'continuing insult to women' by replicating socially constructed ideals of femininity (Kleiman, 1999). Discussions also address how drag can be a divisive tool, creating differences and divisions within social groups, particularly regarding the 'marginalisation of drag performers' from certain communities (Levitt et al., 2018). Additionally, the recent globalisation and increased public consumption of drag have frequently been linked to the commodification of drag performance, leading to a shift in values in line with late capitalism's consumerist ideals (Buck, 2019).

One often-cited catalyst for this commodification is the enduring popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (first aired in 2009). Despite ongoing discussions that suggest neoliberal attitudes have reshaped the operations of drag-based cultural industries and altered the ideologies of individuals engaging with it, few academics have explored the perspectives of drag performers within these communities on these issues.

Recent scholarship, including edited volumes by Edwards and Farrier (2019, A, B), offers contemporary intellectual insights into performers' understandings of both national and international drag performance, the impact of mainstreaming drag performance in current social and historical contexts, and comprehensive explorations of historical drag narratives and communities. However, there remains a noticeable absence of academic work examining the socio-economic dimensions of drag performance or assessing how modes of drag performance and public visibility transition from cultural to social and economic realms. Debates on the commodification of and infiltration of neoliberalist ideology into drag cultures can also lack depth, particularly regarding their significance on performers' social and human experiences.

Similarly, there is scant research on the current state of the United Kingdom's drag performance scenes, with a predominant (but perhaps understandable) focus on American media and drag performers/performances. Existing research centred on the UK tends to concentrate on larger metropolitan cities and their thriving LGBTQIA+ communities and associated drag scenes, neglecting regions with admittedly smaller, but still vibrant scenes like the Midlands and mid-sized cities such as Nottingham. Furthermore, recent academic debates in drama and theatre studies often diverge from sociological research. While theatre studies typically analyse performances and techniques employed, sociological-based research engages with participants but fails to explore their perceptions and experiences comprehensively. This gap between the two fields hampers the realisation of interdisciplinary potentials, limiting the creation of comprehensive ethnographic studies on drag scenes and their participants in specific geographic locations.

Existing research on the geographical factors influencing drag communities is relatively scarce. When such studies exist, they again, predominantly centre on drag communities in the United States. For

instance, Taylor and Rupp considered drag performers in Florida (2004). Even studies not primarily focused on location often revolve around American contexts, as seen in Knutson et al.'s investigation into the emotional and psychological experiences of American performers (2018). When research extends beyond the United States, it tends to concentrate on metropolitan areas, presumably since such scenes are the most prominent and well-populated. Examples include Barlsten's work on drag in Berlin (2004) and Willox's study on 'UK drag,' which solely focuses on observations from London (2003). Social media's significant role in drag is frequently examined in academia, such as Feldman and Hakim's exploration of social media's impact on the 'celebrification' of drag (2020) and Lingel and Golub's research on the 'sociotechnical practices of online communication' within Brooklyn's drag community in New York City (2015). However, few studies delve into how performers utilise social media for entrepreneurial purposes, which, as this thesis argues, can exemplify their neoliberal tendencies. The lack of research on these points forms the basis of this project's objectives.

This project then, seeks to occupy absences of research by developing a comprehensive study, utilising sociological and ethnographic methodologies, that explores drag's socioeconomic dimensions in Nottingham, with a deliberate focus on the neoliberal contexts in which it operates. With intentions of moving academic investigation away from the metropolitan and to lesser-metropolitan regions where socioeconomic dimensions shift, this thesis interrogates the use of social media by drag performers in addition to considering the perceptions of performers themselves on their use of and engagement with social media. The thick description excerpt that introduces this chapter is a pertinent example of the considerations that this thesis intends to make and address when analysing drag as a topic. I discovered this through my re-reading of the project's observation notes when writing this thesis. It became evident that this particular and unedited observation in so many ways began to address or at least provoke thought around the focuses that are so integral to this project. It alludes to the increasing popularity, understanding and consumption of drag performance through or at least in light of outlets such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its wide audiences whilst also addressing the scarcity of queer spaces in Nottingham and their operation in its night-time economy. It also provides insight into the social notions of community within the Nottingham's local drag scene, suggests the existence of differences between celebrified and local performers, acknowledges the uses of social media by drag performers, and recognises issues with resistance (themes which will undoubtedly be unpacked throughout this thesis). Whilst lesser-metropolitan areas (like Nottingham) may not have the same level of financial affluence as major metropolitan centres, they still play a vital role in the neoliberal city economy. This role is explored throughout the discussions of this thesis in relation to the operations of its local drag performers, through the fostering of their local entrepreneurship and active status in competitive social and economic markets. These smaller regions then maintain

independent and active economies within broader neoliberal frameworks, even if local performers are actively challenged by those same lesser-metropolitan economies. The aims and objectives of this thesis[1] are to explore the socioeconomic dimensions of drag scenes in Nottingham and surrounding mid-sized cities in the Midlands, examining how these factors impact local drag performers. By conducting comparative analyses and ethnographic research, the study will identify patterns of exploitation within the drag community and assess how drag performances influence community engagement and local economies. Additionally, it will critique the influence of neoliberal attitudes on drag culture, particularly in relation to social media practices and performers' occupational and financial exploitation. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines textual analysis with grounded ethnographic and sociological methods, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and economic dynamics of drag performance in the region.

The methodological approach employed in this study breaks new ground within the field. It blends textual and theatrical analysis, particularly through the scrutiny of specific drag performances, with grounded ethnographic research (conducting qualitative interviews and participant observations with local performers). Furthermore, this project offers originality by holding focus on UK-based drag, particularly in medium-sized cities like Nottingham, and examining the economic and geographic factors that shape LGBTQIA+ cultures in these urban areas. As this project progressed, its focus evolved to delve more deeply into the engagement with neoliberalist ideologies and their permeation of drag culture. It explores the ramifications of these ideologies on performers' experiences and presents a more comprehensive analysis of social media's presence in the drag community, examining how participants utilise these platforms.

Before detailing the structure of this thesis, it is necessary to define some of the key terms which will be used throughout this work. This section is not intended to solely retell the historical and lexical origins of these words, but instead intends to address the definitions they reflect in *my* research and how they should be understood in the context of this project. Simply, defining drag can be a problematic process. This is understood by Amelia Jones who states that any kind of work that involves the 'body' (in this case drag) provides a heightened sense of a gendered body which is performed, works to 'unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in [...] formalist model[s] of art evaluation' and therefore its associated terms reflect that (Jones, 1998, 5). Since academic interest in drag has flourished, considerable attention has been paid to the terminology and lexis used to identify, determine, and categorise the qualities a person must exhibit to be referred to as a drag

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[1] These aims and objectives are both closely informed and related to the project's research questions found in the discussion section Chapter 3.

performer. By many, a 'drag performance' is simply understood as an individual's open exhibition of an opposite gender to their sex through the choice to wear gendered articles of clothing: 'stereotypically gendered clothing or costume worn by someone of the opposite sex' (Merriam Webster, 2020). However, this definition undermines the subversive nature of drag performance and fails to account for a spectrum of gender diversity or the common rejection of heteronormative binaries exhibited in our current social epoch. It is therefore my argument that drag performance is not defined by the clothing someone wears, as this reduces drag to an exclusively visual spectacle and regards any individual who does not conform to the very strictest of gender codes (i.e only purchasing gendered clothing in designated sections within retail stores) as a drag performer. More problematically, if this definition was to be utilised it would often encompass people who identify as non-binary, transgender, or another gender-identity regardless of them engaging in drag performance or not.

Therefore, definitions should include clear separations between every day lived identities, and the temporary heightened performance of gender (or non-gender) identities that drag performers enact. This is to prevent an unethical and irresponsible reduction of lived-gender identities as illusory or false and this need for separation is corroborated by Knutson et al who states that: 'a defining feature for drag [performers] is the fact that they are able to choose when to present gender parody and when to present their actual gender' (2018, 34). Yet definitions of drag should also be inclusive, which Knutson's and Merriam Websters statements both struggle to highlight. We now regularly understand gender to be constructed and socially inscribed as per Butler's work (1999) and additionally the extent to which people identify in our social and historical epoch reaches far beyond the heteronormative binaries that these statements infer. Not all performers identify as a gender and/or their drag performance does not always include the performance of gender, such as drag performers creating conceptual looks or even appearing as genderless beings (aliens, deities, or monsters even). Therefore, terms such as 'drag' and 'drag performer' should not exclusively represent false representations of gender. So how can we understand these definitions whilst navigating around these issues with gender and avoiding the common conflation of drag 'performance with gender identity' leading to ignorance of 'people who identify as gender diverse' (Knutson et al., 2018, 32).

Commonly utilised lexical terms to refer to performers are 'drag queen' and 'drag king'. A drag queen is defined as 'a man who dresses as a woman and impersonates female characteristics for public entertainment' or 'a male transvestite' (Collins Dictionary, 2020, A), and a drag king is defined as 'a woman who dresses as a man and impersonates male characteristics for public entertainment' (Collins Dictionary, 2020, B). These terms are equally problematic and oversimplistic. This is because they suggest that only cisgender males and/or females can perform drag, whereas in reality drag

performers include a much wider and diverse demographic, including those who identify as cisgender or something other than that: especially since drag can 'represent a type of gender expression that is not necessarily tied to […] a person's core gender identity or sexual orientation' (Knutson et al., 2018, 33). The definitions above also attribute the purpose of drag as being for public entertainment, failing to consider qualities that influence and affect the individual adopting drag, such as creative expression etc (qualities that will be considered throughout this thesis). Therefore, in this project the term 'drag performer' will be utilised in place of 'drag queen' or 'drag king' – unless quoting directly from a participant. This helps work towards more inclusive understandings of drag whilst also raising the importance of self-identification rather than the categorisation of persons by external parties: 'self-identification as a drag [performer] is the best characteristic to distinguish drag performers from others who cross-dress or who parody gender in public arenas' (Knutson et al., 2018, 33). Self-identification shapes what constitutes 'drag performance.' When an individual publicly adopts a different persona from their everyday self, whether through (i) self-identification, (ii) promotion, or (iii) participation in planned shows (and performs accordingly), it qualifies as drag. For this study, 'drag performance' refers specifically to physical performances at events and venues in Nottingham.

Since much of the discussion throughout this thesis is framed by theorisations of neoliberalism, it is also important to address its definition here. Neoliberalism is yet another concept that evades simple definition and various academics have sought to define the term, each with approaches that offer differing nuances. Simple understandings of the concept might characterise neoliberalism as an economic and political ideology that emphasises free markets, limited government intervention, privatisation, and individual responsibility. However, David Harvey - a notable theorist in this field, explains how neoliberalism is much more complicated. He argues itis a theory of political economic practices rather than a theory of sole political ideology (2005). These practices, which are nevertheless often characterised by preferences for free-trade markets and privatisation, then work to promote entrepreneurial tendencies in individuals affected by them. This means that Harvey's definition views neoliberalism 'not as the rejuvenation of liberalism in general, but as a distinctive economic theory […] [and instead] as something which lives independently of more traditional liberal values and policies' (Thorson, 2010, 199).

Thorson builds on the work of Harvey but instead suggests that neoliberalism is a 'loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to safeguard individual liberty, understood as a sort of mercantile liberty for individuals and corporations' (Thorson, 2010, 202). This definition represents most clearly the further discussions of this project, regarding the effects that neoliberal ideology imposes on drag industries and the local performers that construct them. In the context of the infiltration of

neoliberalism into drag performance industries, this quote suggests that neoliberalism is not just a rigid political ideology, but rather a flexible socio-political framework guiding the relationship between the state and those that live in it. This flexibility allows neoliberal principles to adapt to various aspects of the drag industry, such as commercialisation, individualism, and market competition, without being bound by a single, cohesive ideology (Thorson, 2010, 203). Thus, these definitions frame future explorations of the links between neoliberalism and drag industries (global and local) in this thesis.

I will build upon the above discussions in existing literature in Chapter 2, with a thorough literature review which more closely explores this project's claims to originality and the literature that informs it. Following this, I articulate the ethnographic methodological processes and considerations undertaken to approach this research in Chapter 3. In this chapter, we delve into the comprehensive research framework guiding the project, which encompasses the initial exploratory studies that shaped this framework. I detail the methodologies employed for data collection and analysis, shedding light on their intricacies and nuances. Moreover, I critically examine the inherent limitations of these methodologies and conscientiously address the ethical considerations inherent in the research, emphasising the measures implemented to protect the welfare and confidentiality of the project's participants throughout the process.

Chapter 4, which marks the first of several discussion-based chapters of this thesis, begins to address the complex issues faced by Nottingham's local queer communities that result from their local specificity. It illuminates a historical erosion of queer visibility in the city's night-time economy evidenced through the closure of its queer-oriented safe spaces. Additionally, this chapter suggests that local queer communities are exploited by the remaining queer safe spaces that *do* exist in the city despite these historical closures. I suggest that heteronormative establishments' pursuit of profit from local queer economies is born out of financial opportunism that exploits the very communities they claim to support and fails to adequately protect the physical and mental wellbeing of those same communities. Meanwhile, as local drag performers, by maintaining their public presence in such settings, introduce a much needed (and potentially profitable) queer USP to an otherwise heteronormative environment. Consequently, local performers take these limited and not unproblematic opportunities offered but use drag as a tool to reclaim the city's queer identity, establish safer queer spaces, and advocate for the restoration of public queer visibility. I contend that this reclaiming of the night-time economy transforms the public roles of these individuals from mere queer performance artists to active queer activists.

Chapter 5 exclusively examines the UK's drag industry and explores the external influences that have shaped its evolution. A significant factor in this transformation is the globalisation of drag, driven by

its heightened visibility. I contend that this increased prominence has been propelled not only by shifting social attitudes and a growing acceptance of marginalised queer communities, but also by extensive coverage of drag on social media and reality television platforms both nationally and internationally. This chapter analyses how these changes have transformed the industry's structure over time, placing performers in a new industrial landscape. It also explores how local performers respond to this by seeking, where possible, to adapt to the expectations set by globalised and mainstream drag media. This chapter continues by addressing the challenges local performers face in their quest for work within the city, examining how these pursuits are directly impacted by the changing dynamics of the drag industry.

Chapter 6 continues these discussions by exploring how shifts in attitudes towards drag and changes in its industrial landscape directly impact the personal lives of performers beyond their professional endeavours. It posits that neoliberal ideology has not only permeated local drag scenes and the broader drag industry but has also intruded into various aspects of performers' social and personal spheres outside of drag. A significant aspect of this intrusion is the blurred boundaries between personal, occupational, and social aspects of drag performers' lives. These discussions are enriched through a comparative analysis of interview data obtained from respondents in Nottingham and Manchester. The chapter concludes by contemplating how drag performers may be particularly vulnerable to the neoliberal infiltration and influence, owing this to the intricate nature of drag and its inherent blending of identities—the everyday-self and the drag persona.

Chapter 7 interrogates the significant role of social media, particularly Instagram, in the lives of local drag performers. It underscores how performers embrace neoliberal entrepreneurial attitudes by leveraging social media to enhance their physical drag work and cultivate their virtual and physical reputations. This digital engagement opens new opportunities for performers to secure work beyond their local night-time economy, thus enabling them to remain competitive in oversaturated drag markets. Additionally, the chapter explores how, through self-promotion on virtual platforms, some drag performers experience a transformation from simply being performers to emerging social media influencers.

These explorations are concluded in Chapter 8 which draws together these arguments and suggests the complexity of lesser-metropolitan drag scenes such as Nottingham, influenced by the current state of its night-time economy alongside the globalisation and cultural mainstreaming of drag industries. Recommendations are made here for future research and development of this thesis' focus.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

It could be argued that throughout history, drag has served as a vital aspect of queer culture, offering a platform for the subversion and playful exploration of heteronormative gender norms and characteristics. Whilst acknowledging its historical roots and its role within queer culture, this literature review focuses primarily on drag's contemporary manifestations and its impact on cultural discourse in the 21st century. In recent years, drag has experienced a resurgence in popularity and visibility, particularly within mainstream culture. This newfound prominence can largely be attributed to the US, with the advent of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*) in 2009 serving as a pivotal moment for the public consumption and visibility of drag. As Abraham (2019) notes, while Britain may have had a longer history with drag, it was the global phenomenon of *RPDR* that propelled drag into the cultural mainstream, transforming it into a global monolith. Today, drag performances, competitions, balls, and celebrity drag stars such as RuPaul and Lady Bunny have become ubiquitous in popular culture, transcending geographical boundaries and captivating audiences worldwide. This proliferation of drag representation has not only enriched the global cultural landscape but has also sparked important conversations about gender, identity, and representation. Despite alleged origins in British culture, drag's contemporary influence extends far beyond its geographical roots, shaping and re-shaping cultural discourse on a global scale. As we delve deeper into the intersections of drag performance, culture, and identity, it becomes increasingly evident that drag occupies a unique and significant position within contemporary cultural narratives, challenging conventions, and celebrating diversity.

This literature review serves to illuminate and evaluate the extensive discourse existing within various research domains pertinent to the focal point of this thesis. To respond to this range, the following discussions are organised thematically. They commence with a brief examination of the historical underpinnings of drag (2.1), encompassing literature that elucidates the origins and evolution of drag as an artistic form throughout history. Subsequently, attention is directed towards literature concerning drag-based practices and culture in the aftermath of *RPDR*, encompassing discussions on the transformation of the drag industry and its integration into mainstream culture on a global scale (2.2). Further investigations delve into existing literature's treatment of metropolitan and smaller-scale urban drag scenes, alongside evaluations of the state of queer nightlife (2.3). The following section explores the state of existing literature around the social effects of drag on local performers within these contexts (2.4). The chapter culminates by advocating for the originality and relevance of the project, thereby highlighting gaps within existing literature that this thesis aims to address and occupy (2.5).

2.1) Historical Foundations of Drag and Queer Nightlife

The origins of drag are frequently associated with British history, specifically from the Elizabethan era (16th century) (Abraham, 2019) where female roles were played by male actors due to the prohibition of females procuring theatrical occupations, laying a foundation that would evolve into drag performance. Yet, the roots of drag can be traced further back. Evidence of this encompasses the cultural activities of ancient civilisations, where cross-dressing and gender performance played integral roles in religious rites and theatrical productions. Judith Butler's seminal work Gender Trouble (1999) briefly explores ancient Greek theatre, revealing how male actors also portrayed female characters which therefore challenged normalised societal constructs of gender (whilst of course, those social constructs were also historically varying). The dynamic interplay of religious orthodoxy and cultural subversion that occurred throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, have also been argued to have shaped modern drag performance. Judith Bennett's History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism (2006) explores the regulation of gender roles in medieval society, which are specifically juxtaposed with clandestine cross-dressing in theatrical productions. Additionally, the research of Stallybrass (1992) examines the subversive potential of cross-dressing in Renaissance masquerade balls, reflecting several characteristics of modern drag performance. These events served as a platform for challenging social conventions and authority, echoing elements that resonate with contemporary drag performances. Stallybrass's analysis sheds light on how such acts of subversion in the past laid the groundwork for the expressive and boundary-pushing nature of modern drag culture.

Transitioning to more contemporary examinations of drag culture, Bailey's scholarship (2011) provides valuable insights into the cultural significance of drag balls within African American LGBTQIA+ communities in the US. Bailey unveils the profound societal shifts these events have undergone. From their covert origins as spaces of defiance against societal norms to their current status as vibrant celebrations of diversity and self-affirmation, drag balls encapsulate a journey of liberation and visibility for the LGBTQIA+ community. Bailey's exploration not only highlights the cultural significance of drag balls but also underscores their enduring legacy as symbols of resilience and belonging. Similarly, mainstream media representations, such as the renowned documentary Paris is Burning (Livingston, 1990), offer compelling narratives of ballroom culture in New York City and the urban communities that fostered its development. Through vivid storytelling and intimate interviews, the film captures the creativity, resilience, and camaraderie of individuals within the ballroom scene, shedding light on experiences within LGBTQIA+ communities. These complementary analyses, both scholarly and cinematic, contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural

dimensions of drag performance, highlighting its profound impact on marginalised communities and the broader landscape of queer culture.

Academic discussion conducted by Baker (1995) and Bloomfield (2023) delves deeply and widely into the historical evolution and development of drag as an artistic expression. Their scholarly investigations not only trace the origins of drag on a global scale but also offer insights into its specific manifestations within British culture. These historical explorations lay a foundational understanding of drag's roots, providing valuable context for contemporary analyses. Building upon this historical groundwork, scholars such as Moncrieff and Leonard (2017) have delved into more contemporary histories of drag, exploring the social phenomena and public visibility of drag. Their work explores the intricate dynamics surrounding the public portrayal of the 'drag queen' persona, employing signalling theory to dissect the historical trajectory of drag's public presence. By examining how drag's visibility has evolved over time, Moncrieff and Leonard shed light on its enduring legacy and its implications for contemporary queer communities. Moreover, their analysis elucidates how drag continues to serve as a means of social mobility and empowerment for individuals within these modern communities.

These scholars employ multifaceted approaches, drawing from historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives, to provide a comprehensive understanding of drag as not only an artistic expression but also a complex social phenomenon. By weaving together insights from various disciplines, they offer a nuanced exploration of drag's significance within LGBTQIA+ communities and its broader impact on society. Their research serves to bridge the gap between the past and the present, illuminating the growing relevance of drag in contemporary contexts. By contextualising drag within such historical frameworks and cultural landscapes these scholars reveal drag's deep roots and its evolution over time. Additionally, they demonstrate how drag continues to challenge societal norms and conventions, serving as a vehicle for social change and empowerment. These scholars shed light on the diverse and multifaceted nature of drag, recognising its role as a form of artistic expression and cultural critique. In doing so, they contribute to a richer, more nuanced discourse surrounding drag and its significance within LGBTQIA+ communities.

The history of British drag is rich and multifaceted, tracing its evolution from the early days of performance to its contemporary manifestations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the music hall became a pivotal space for drag performance, where male impersonators such as Vesta Tilley gained immense popularity, challenging gender norms through comedic and musical acts. The mid-20th century saw the emergence of iconic figures like Danny La Rue, who brought glamour and wit to the stage, popularising drag in mainstream culture. Academics such as Jacob Bloomfield have

documented this UK-based cultural landscape, with specific focus on Danny La Rue (2023). La Rue's performances not only entertained audiences but also paved the way for greater acceptance of drag as a legitimate art form (Bloomfield, 2023). Following in this tradition, Lily Savage emerged in the 1980s as a sharp-tongued, camp character, blending humour with social commentary, which resonated deeply with audiences during a time of significant social change in the UK. Savage's influence exemplifies how drag can serve as both entertainment and a platform for addressing pressing societal issues, particularly within the LGBTQIA+ community. As these performers navigated the complexities of identity and representation, they contributed to a broader cultural discourse that continues to inform contemporary drag. This historical trajectory not only highlights the artistic evolution of drag in Britain but also underscores its role in challenging societal norms and fostering community among marginalised groups. By placing these figures within the broader context of drag's evolution, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of drag performance in shaping British queer identity and its lasting influence in contemporary society.

2.2) Drag-Based Practice and Drag Culture Post *RuPaul's Drag Race*

Since several of the discussions within this thesis are situated in relation to the cultural significance of *RPDR*, it is important within this literature review to fully unpack the literature that exists around this phenomena and drag-based entertainment industries.

RuPaul stands as a notable and popular figure in drag within mainstream cultural imaginaries. His ascent to fame commenced in the early 1990s, marked by a series of significant milestones. Notably, he secured a coveted spot as a featured club event, leading to a contract with Tommy Records. Additionally, RuPaul broadened his reach by hosting a morning radio show and securing a modelling contract with MAC cosmetics and his visibility further skyrocketed with the launch of a television show, cementing his status as an icon of drag culture (McCelland, 2013). His influence even extended to the music industry, where he made a memorable cameo as a host during the 1993 MTV Music Awards, reaching audiences across the US (McCelland, 2013). The growth of RuPaul's fame and economic success culminated in the inception of *RPDR*, a sequential reality television drag competition. Inspired by the vibrant drag balls of the 20th century that were integral to queer culture, this show features multiple drag queens competing against each other for a substantial cash prize and the coveted title of America's "next drag superstar". Since airing in 2009, the show has had 12 consecutive seasons, 4 spin off seasons, and 5 international versions including the recent airing of *RPDR UK* (2019): '*RuPaul's Drag Race* has become a behemoth with seemingly unstoppable forward motion' (Barnes, 2020).

Whilst drag performance has undeniably thrived within queer culture, exemplified by the extravagant drag balls of the 1920s onwards (Bailey 2011), intimate performances in dedicated spaces like gay bars, and occasional appearances in mainstream media such as the 1972 John Waters' film Pink Flamingos (Them., 2018), it is *RPDR* that has emerged as a seminal force in propelling drag into the mainstream spotlight, both domestically in the US and globally. Described by Barnes as 'the high watermark of mainstream success for global drag culture' (2020), the show has heralded a new era of visibility and appreciation for drag as an art form. *RPDR* then serves as more than just a reality television competition; it is a cultural phenomenon that has reshaped perceptions of drag and queer identity worldwide (Brann, 2017).

Drag has experienced a growing accessibility, finding acceptance not only within specialised queer circles but also among broader audiences, including allies and individuals less familiar with LGBTQIA+ culture, thanks to the widespread reach of media platforms. This expanded accessibility has not only led to a surge in the consumption and visibility of drag and queer culture in mainstream markets but has also sparked a renewed interest in drag within the very cultures from which it originated: queer communities. The effects of *RPDR* in drag's increasing popularity in the mainstream are widely discussed as in the work of Baxter et al., which identifies and analyses the changing dynamic of British drag audiences, partially because of *RPDR's* mainstreaming of drag (2022, A, B).

The sheer amount of literature found relating to the franchise solidifies the claim made in the introduction to this review - that the reality TV show has increased the visibility of drag tremendously, so much so that the interest of academics has also been greatly captured by the reality TV show. Much of this academic interest relies upon analyses of the show itself (Brown, 2018. Buck, 2019. Chetwynd, 2020.), whilst very few studies refer to the effect of the show on different demographics and people. Despite receiving much appreciation from the public, as highlighted by its continued economic success, *RPDR* has also been heavily criticised, and this is heavily reflected in the academic texts written about it. The central theme in an overwhelming majority of critical literature is the commodification of drag performance, and the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies and expectations into the art form of drag, both of which it is commonly argued that *RPDR* has catalysed. It's noteworthy that certain theoretical analyses seem to adopt a critical and unfavourable view of the show. These perspectives argue that the infusion of capitalist principles into drag, particularly through the lens of constructed reality TV, imposes what is termed as an 'ideological cost', stemming from the show's mainstream success (Chetwynd, 2020, 22). Moreover, the emergence of newer, more "niche" shows like Dragula serves to further highlight the mainstream, reality-TV nature of *RPDR*. This heightened visibility of the franchise within the realm of reality television raises questions about its impact on the

authenticity and cultural roots of drag performance, prompting deeper inquiries into the intersection of commercialisation and artistic expression within the drag community at both global and local levels.

It is undeniable that the platform provided by *RPDR* as a reality TV show extends its reach far beyond what any performance in a gay bar or LGBTQIA+ venue could achieve. As Hall-Araujo suggests, 'this broad circulation facilitates participation in the global capitalist marketplace' (2016, 235). Neoliberalism and its nuances which condition societal thinking is argued to have been allowed into drag performance and its associated cultures through *RPDR*. Hall-Araujo, in an article suggesting the links between 'the American dream' and *RPDR*, suggests that the show's 'ambivalent and lucrative engagement with consumer culture' allows for 'drag identities to be [newly] branded' (2016, 233-235). A frequently debated illustration of this phenomenon is the consistent reliance on product placement on *RPDR*. Beyond merely serving as an entertainment program, there is a clear desire to boost profits for its overarching production company World of Wonder, with drag positioned as the 'primary economic engine' driving this endeavour (Goldmark, 2015, 508). This persistent inclusion and dependence on product placement within the show highlights this clearly: 'sponsors are often built into the challenges themselves' (Goldmark, 2015, 503). Illustrations of this phenomenon include instances where contestants are tasked with 'creating a commercial for programme sponsor MAC cosmetics' or participating in the 'Absolut Drag Ball' during which 'contestants design costumes based on the flavoured vodkas of sponsor Absolut Vodka' (Goldmark, 2015, 503). It is this incorporation of sponsors into different facets of *RPDR* that 'connects consumption with success' reflecting a broader trend seen in contemporary reality television (Goldmark, 2015, 503). Several find this to be especially problematic when considering the artistic and political "authenticity" at the heart of drag as an art form: as 'drag is at its most powerful when it questions dominant arrangements of power' and in not only succumbing to capitalist and neoliberal agencies but in utilising them, this power is argued to be weakened (Barnes, 2020).

It is worth mentioning at this point that numerous discussions centre around the globalisation and commercialisation of drag, and consequently, queer culture, as it moves into mainstream spheres in pursuit of profit. Notable theorists such as Feldman and Hakim (2020) have delved into the phenomenon of celebrification within *RPDR* whereby contestants are transformed into commoditised drag stars. Their research prompts critical inquiry into the potential implications and complexities arising from this process. Here the global influence of *RPDR* becomes embroiled in the contentious realm of queer assimilation politics, sparking intense debate. Abraham states that 'drag has [now] permeated many unexpected parts of culture and that 'drag culture has become entertainment for straight and LGBTQ[IA+] people alike' (2019). It is argued by some that this 'has had a massive hand in normalising the idea of the drag queen, at least in the American mediascape' and therefore it fosters

public queer acceptance and representation (Barnes, 2020). This is furthered by *RPDR's* highlighting of contestants who are 'social activists too' such as 'Bob the Drag Queen' who is a 'Black Lives Matter advocate', alongside 'Carmen Carrera and Gia Gunn' who are active 'trans activists' (Hermes and Kardolus, 2019, 463). There's even a suggestion that reality television serves as a vehicle for queer representation to gain acceptance among the public, contributing to 'LGBTQI[A+] awareness' (Greaf, 2016, 660).

This claim is illustrated by the involvement of a wide range of individuals, including heterosexuals and those with diverse sexual orientations and identities, in group *RPDR* viewing events at bars and pubs (Macintyre, 2018). However, the enthusiasm shown by these diverse groups seems to be overshadowed by the substantial criticism surrounding the mainstreaming of queer culture into non-queer cultures. It is said that *RPDR* is created for 'mass appeal […] [and] to entertain the straights with drag, while delivering a queer subtext' (Hall-Araujo, 2016, 236) elements of which may be lost in translation, devaluing aspects of drag performance and the very complex subtexts performed through it. In the 'strategy to sell "gay culture" to a mixed audience of gay men and heterosexual women' the show begins to 'trade on the long-standing associations between gay men and sophisticated consumption' creating a problematic alienation of queer cultures by appealing 'to a sizeable female audience' (Goldmark, 2015, 504). It's worth considering here how the goals of the show may have evolved since its inception. It's understandable that a show which initially gained significant recognition and financial success would increasingly prioritise sustaining and expanding that same success, at the expense of prioritising it over the protection and empowerment of LGBTQIA+ communities.

Functioning as a gateway into cultures beyond queer communities, the drag of *RPDR*, particularly in its portrayal of a certain type of "heterosexual-family-appropriate" and "tamer" form, may inadvertently perpetuate a 'privatised, depoliticised gay culture' focused on consumption rather than acceptance or social change as suggested by Barnes (2020). Traditionally unrecognised outside LGBTQIA+ spaces, drag performers have often operated on the margins of capitalism, with the potential for cultural gatekeeping by those within the queer community. Some scholars now question whether, because of *RPDR's* globalisation and mainstreaming of drag, that drag is under threat of becoming an economic vehicle rather than a force for 'querying or dismantling dominant power structures' (Barnes, 2020). The *RPDR* DragCon event serves as a notable example of the show's emphasis on profitability. Originating in the US, DragCon has expanded internationally over time, reflecting the show's global influence and commercial ambitions. This event underscores *RPDR's* prioritisation of profit, as it capitalises on the popularity of the show and the enthusiasm of its fanbase to generate revenue through ticket sales, merchandise, and sponsorships. Additionally, the expansion

of DragCon across borders demonstrates the show's successful branding and its ability to attract audiences worldwide, further solidifying its status as a lucrative enterprise within the entertainment industry. Abraham encapsulates these nuanced emotions of loss and encouragement associated with drag for non-queer individuals amidst the influence of neoliberal and capitalist forces through *RPDR*. They explain, 'it feels like it's made for straight people, which is good in a way because it helps people understand an element of how queer people think about gender, but the casting isn't that diverse and the depictions of us are one-dimensional' (2019). Leading from this and as Parslow points out, *RPDR's* problematic handling of diversity and its prioritisation of heteronormative audiences perpetuate the assimilationist politics referred to earlier (2020, 19).

Abundant discussions of links between *RPDR* and neoliberalism, in the literature (Heller, 2020. Hopkins, 2004. LeMaster, 2015. Feldman and Hakim, 2020.), are further developed when analysing the representations of contestants themselves. Academics such as Hall-Araujo have stated that 'personal transformations' tend to 'serve the show's dramatic narrative' and that this 'transformation, self-invention and the possibility for social-advancement based on personal merit are hallmarks' for the 'American dream' (2016, 237). The related utilisation of victimisation as a process with which to construct narratives around queer reality is noted to be problematic: for example, a contestant came out as HIV positive on an episode that was sponsored by MAC's Viva Glam collection, which donated profits to separate LGBTQIA+ charities. This is a direct example of the manipulation of real queer lives to obtain economic profit. Although profits were donated to charity by MAC, the life of a contestant was unethically manipulated to advertise a multi-billion-dollar company and therefore became a commoditised body for sale (Goldmark, 2015).

These personal transformations and notions of vulnerability also play into characteristics of an ideal neoliberal citizen, which 'gives faith and encourages industriousness in the process' (Hall-Araujo, 2016, 237). Goldmark furthers this argument when referring to a catchphrase often used throughout the show 'you better work' which, whilst appearing to 'unify a community […] [it] distinguishes between those who work to consume and those who are consumed as working commodities' (2015, 503). RuPaul is an example of this. As a 'gay black drag queen RuPaul himself defies victimhood symbolising the American Dream's achievability for Drag Race contestants' so that this 'defiance is part of his drag persona brand' (Hall-Araujo, 2016, 237). This is similar to the victimised and vulnerable contestant discussed earlier, after openly discussing a harrowing and upsetting truth regarding their HIV status would then transform into an elegant beauty on the runway, perpetuating an image of resilience and overcoming.

Hermes and Kardolus shed light on the discomfort that arises from the representation of RuPaul's staunch neoliberal ideology within the show: 'Ru's [and the show's representations of] strong neoliberal views about making your way and owning your future [is] uncomfortable' (2019, 463). This ideology emphasises individualism, self-reliance, and the pursuit of personal success, aligning with capitalist principles of entrepreneurship and ownership. While these values may resonate with some viewers, they can also be unsettling for those who question the implications of promoting such ideals within the context of drag culture and LGBTQIA+ activism. On the one hand, RuPaul's emphasis on "making your way" and "owning your future" may empower individuals to take charge of their lives and pursue their dreams. It can be seen as a message of resilience and determination, encouraging marginalised communities to strive for success despite societal barriers. On the other hand, this neoliberal rhetoric may overlook systemic inequalities and reinforce a mentality that fails to acknowledge structural obstacles faced by marginalised groups, including people of colour, transgender individuals, and those from low-income backgrounds. Within the realm of drag culture, which has long served as a bastion of resistance against societal norms and capitalist oppression, the portrayal of neoliberal values on the show may seem at odds. This dichotomy raises concerns about the potential subversion of drag and the erosion of its radical essence as a catalyst for social transformation. Championing individual achievement over collective activism runs the risk of undermining drag's historical role in challenging mainstream ideals. Hermes and Kardolus (2019) draw attention to this tension, underscoring the clash between RuPaul's neoliberal worldview and the dissident origins of drag. Their analysis prompts us to critically examine the consequences of aligning drag with mainstream capitalist ideologies. Chetwynd corroborates the concern for effects on public mentalities regarding these neoliberal emphases: 'the emphasis on self-transformation is profoundly damaging to the potential for socio-political change' and 'narratives of resilience and confidence undermine notions of collective dissent because instead of focusing on structural change, the individual is expected to succeed or be blamed for failure' (Chetwynd, 2020, 25-28).

Another way in which the links between *RPDR* and neoliberalism are addressed is the ways in which the show's competition format reflects capitalist ideologies and reinforced notions of marketable bodies and entrepreneurial practices of self-branding. Parslow states that 'returning to the notion of a competition reifies the idea of competition within capitalism' (2020, 23). The resonances between neoliberal subjectivity and reality TV have been addressed in the field of media studies, including the work of Ouellette and Hay (2007) alongside other scholars who more directly associate similar claims but focus them around *RPDR* (Levitt, 2013). Since a focus on neoliberalism is key to this doctoral study's theoretical framework, it is useful to consider this literature here as this work claims that reality TV works to support neoliberal ideology and cultivate individual responsibility for audiences.

In its positioning as a queer competition show, *RPDR* is also involved in these practices. It does so by 'constructing individual subjects into entrepreneurial actors who are autonomous and self-calculating, and who must bear the responsibility for their lives no matter the constraints of poverty, racism, sexism, and so on [and] Drag Race reaffirms this ideology by emphasising the supposed liberatory qualities of entrepreneurialism through its competitive format' (Buck, 2019, 2). And it is this notion of competition between individuals in the queer community that several critics problematise. To succeed, the show enforces the neoliberal construction of a 'self-brand' the success of which depends on treating themselves 'as a market, as a business' (Chetwynd 2020, 29). But it is how this success is determined that is widely debated, as it is suggested by several academics that the show prioritises not only certain types and aesthetics of drag above others, potentially to produce mass appeal to heterosexual audiences in addition to queer ones, but also the body types of those performing them. This is most straightforwardly highlighted by Chetwynd who states that the judges in *RPDR* establish rules of "realness" – standards by which the feminine illusion of drag is deemed to be authentic. In some respects, these regulations shed light on the constructed nature of femininity, thereby challenging traditional gender norms. An analysis of the standards of authenticity established within *RPDR* reveals a preference for a conventionally attractive femininity. This is evident in the judges' reactions to slim queens, such as when they approve of a contestant's appearance, or when they critiqued The Vixen for not wearing a waist cincher, remarking, "Imagine that thing just sucked all the way in" (S10E05) (Chetwynd, 2020, 24). This emphasis on a slender and conventionally attractive femininity highlights the notion that, in postfeminist media culture, the body plays a central role in defining womanhood (Chetwynd, 2020, 24). There are two notable things here: (i) a particular aesthetic of drag that is represented as far more likely to succeed within the show – that of a more feminine ideal, and (ii) the power that the judges hold to enforce these ideals. By favouring 'a specific form of drag queening' (Parslow, 2020, 19) in this way, the show then begins to place specific body types in more successful positions, reinforcing issues within the gay community whereby 'gender normativity remains integral to […] the gay mainstream' (Goldmark, 2015, 505) by inferring the quality of a slim and feminine "male" body type above others.

The ramifications of this phenomenon extend beyond surface-level concerns, potentially exacerbating existing tensions within queer communities regarding misogynistic beauty standards. Furthermore, it undermines the perceived authenticity of drag itself. As Hermes and Kardolus assert, 'Drag is meant to produce strong gender identities as performance, irrespective of the body beneath the attire' (2019, 465). It becomes evident that the restrictive beauty standards perpetuated by such representations not only limit the diversity of drag expressions but also reinforce harmful notions of gender conformity and body image within LGBTQIA+ communities. This phenomenon highlights the

tension between the celebratory and subversive potential of drag performance and the commodification and regulation of bodies within mainstream media platforms. Consequently, there is a pressing need for critical interrogation of these dynamics, as well as efforts to amplify diverse voices and representations within drag culture to challenge and disrupt hegemonic beauty standards and gender norms.

These discussions surrounding the assimilation of the gay mainstream into broader culture become even more intricate when we delve into the complexities of intergenerational differences and clashes. The show provides compelling examples, such as the friction between Violet Chachki and Kasha Davis, where generational differences manifest in differing approaches to drag performance and identity expression. Throughout Season 7 of the US leg of *RPDR*, both Violet Chachki and Kasha Davis expressed their opinions and frustrations about each other, exemplifying tensions between the two performers. These moments provided insights into their conflicting perspectives and highlighted the generational differences in their approaches to drag, alongside their reception of the judges' critiques on their work. These examples of generational clashes between performers on *RPDR* reflects broader societal tensions between generations within LGBTQIA+ communities. These intergenerational conflicts underscore the evolving nature of drag culture and its ongoing negotiation between tradition and innovation, authenticity, and commercialisation. They also raise important questions about the inclusivity of drag spaces and the extent to which they accommodate diverse perspectives and identities across generations. Ultimately, the friction between Violet Chachki and Kasha Davis serves as a microcosm of broader debates within the LGBTQIA+ community about the direction of queer culture and the role of drag within it.

This normativity takes on greater complexity when we delve into the categorisation of drag styles within the show. The delineation of drag into distinct categories, such as "pageant queens" and "comedy queens," sets the stage for conflicts between performers who embody contrasting styles and aesthetics. For instance, "pageant queens" often prioritise glamour, polish, and beauty pageant-inspired presentations, focusing on flawless makeup, elaborate costumes, and refined performances. On the other hand, "comedy queens" prioritise humour, wit, and improvisation, incorporating comedic elements into their performances and prioritising entertainment value over traditional beauty standards. Such normativity is frequently explored, including in Gonzalez and Cavazos' work on the representations of gender through *RPDR* contestants (2016). Their work addresses the representations of gender equity on *RPDR*, noting the show's preference for certain body types over others. The conflict between these two categories can arise during challenges where contestants are required to showcase their respective strengths. For example, in a runway challenge emphasising glamour and elegance, tension may arise between a "pageant queen" who excels in such

presentations and a "comedy queen" whose comedic talents may not align with the theme. Moreover, the categorisation of drag styles can lead to stereotyping and pigeonholing of performers, limiting their artistic expression and creative freedom.

In essence, the mainstreaming of drag risks alienating individuals who do not conform to narrow beauty ideals while also diluting the radical potential of drag as a form of gender performance. This departure from the core principles of drag not only undermines its empowering and inclusive essence but also reinforces harmful norms within mainstream culture. This extends beyond just the shape and size of the commoditised body, however, by also subliminally placing preference on certain races and ethnicities and lived-genders such as in the active disregard for trans-representation on the show by RuPaul and in communication/language barriers being at the heart of comedic mockery: 'Who gets to succeed in drag is not exempt from socio-political and cultural impositions […] if *RPDR* is a gateway to being a professional it is important to note that it excludes certain performance forms and identities' (Parslow, 2020, 19). Therefore, and as Goldmark points towards, the show is inadequate at providing equality amongst contestants, despite attempting to establish a 'tale of gay integration' (2015, 502). These claims indirectly conjure questions around the differences between physical spaces in the drag entertainment industry (bars, clubs, etc.) and the artificial and heavily curated studio space of *RPDR*. In several ways, the superficiality of *RPDR's* representation of drag fails to appreciate the barriers and hindrances that performers in live performance venues negotiate, something that will be explored throughout this thesis. The literature within this study has highlighted links between *RPDR* and neoliberalism, problematising the ways in which it represents drag performance and the queer communities often attached to it. Whilst there are occasional instances where an argument is provided for the potential positive consequences of this attachment, it seems as though there is an overwhelming amount of criticism towards it: from the commodification of bodies, a relentless reproduction of neoliberal and postfeminist realities, in favour of certain drag over others, and in the rejection of certain bodies as opposed to others.

There is a particular focus on the US within the literature found and analysed, which is understandable given the geographical origins of *RPDR*. What is interesting however, is the omission of consideration of the effects of this on local drag populations and those who perform drag outside of *RPDR*. The overwhelming discussions that problematise notions of the show's preference of certain body types and the judging criteria alongside it, perpetuate neoliberalist ideals upon its viewing masses and the show fails to account for or interrogate how this is changing the drag industry in the "real world". What is striking is the lack of literature that interrogates the ways in which *RPDR's* assimilationist politics and its losses of queer authenticity are decoded by queer audiences. Shanley (2019), however,

begins to directly interrogate some of these questions by interviewing six US-based drag performers around their opinions on *RPDR* isolating any potential effects that it has had on them.

However, there remains a notable gap when it comes to directly examining the operational dynamics of drag entertainment at the local level within the industry. Shanley's study fails to encompass a broader sample size and demographic representation of performers, as it solely focuses on drag queens from a single American city. Consequently, the geographical scope of the study remains confined to the United States, highlighting a significant deficiency in global representation. This scarcity underscores the urgent need for further research in this area. A more nuanced and field-driven methodological approach is imperative to provide a comprehensive account of how the neoliberal mainstreaming of drag and queer cultures impacts local drag industries and their consumer base. By adopting qualitative and empirical methodologies, researchers can delve deeper into the intricate nuances of these dynamics, capturing a wider array of perspectives and demographics. In light of this, it is my contention that more qualitative and empirical studies akin to Shanley's should be conducted. These studies should build upon the foundation laid by Shanley's research, interrogating the questions raised therein with greater depth and inclusivity. By expanding the scope of research to include a larger and more diverse sample of individuals and demographics, we can gain a more robust understanding of the complex interactions between drag cultures, neoliberalism, and local industries. Such endeavours are essential for advancing scholarly discourse and informing evidence-based interventions that support the sustainability and inclusivity of drag communities worldwide.

2.3) Drag in the Metropolitan and Queer Nightlife

In the streets of metropolitan cities, drag culture emerges as a vibrant and captivating phenomenon. From the neon-lit stages of underground clubs to the glittering avenues of LGBTQIA+ neighbourhoods/city-quarters, drag performance commands attention. The art form has transcended its origins in the subcultural underground, as referred to earlier in this chapter, to become a prominent feature of urban landscapes worldwide. Within the bustling hubs of apparent diversity and acceptance that characterise metropolitan environments, drag thrives as a symbol of defiance, resilience, and creativity. This section of the literature review explores existing work that navigates the intersections of drag culture and urban life, drawing upon a diverse array of scholarly perspectives. Focus here also turns to the state of queer nightlife scenes in those spaces, assessing their stability and history. By synthesising existing research, they shed light on the ways in which drag both reflects and shapes the socio-cultural dynamics of metropolitan spaces. They also, however, reveal an identifiable gap in

knowledge that this thesis seeks to occupy – appreciations of performance scenes in lesser-metropolitan geographical spaces.

Academic work that uncovers the intricacies and nuances of metropolitan drag scenes and the LGBQTIA+ communities that construct them are widespread in the fields of queer, gender, and cultural studies. Much of this work is based on US contexts. For example, City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972 authored by Stein (2000) delves into the intricate tapestry of LGBTQIA+ life in Philadelphia, shedding light on the vibrant and often overlooked histories of these communities. This research unveils the significant role of drag culture within Philadelphia's urban landscape, demonstrating its influence on social dynamics and political movements of the time. Focusing on the period from 1945 to 1972, Stein captures a transformative era marked by burgeoning LGBTQIA+ identities and the emergence of inclusive spaces in metropolitan settings and through this exploration readers are immersed in the rich complexities of drag performance. Stein's narrative not only traces the evolution of drag within Philadelphia but also underscores its broader implications for LGBTQ+ rights and visibility. He highlights the intersections between drag culture and activism, illustrating how drag performers became catalysts for social change, challenging societal norms and advocating for equality.

While extensive research exists on LGBTQIA+ culture in major metropolitan areas like New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago, there is a noticeable gap when it comes to exploring similar phenomena in lesser-metropolitan areas. Scholars such as Chauncey and Strange (1997) have meticulously documented queer culture in iconic cities like New York City, shedding light on drag balls and various forms of gender performance that flourished within these urban environments. Similarly, anthologies like the one edited by Schacht and Underwood (2013) delve into the vibrant drag scenes of major cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and others, highlighting them as hubs of creativity, expression, and community for drag performers. Even Esther Newton's seminal work Mother Camp (1972), which is renowned for being one of the first works that provided an in-depth analysis of drag performers' lives and occupation through an ethnographic approach, is limited by its geographical focus on drag in the US.

Despite heavy academic focus on US-based metropolitan regions, academic explorations of drag, queer communities, and the metropolitan do extend beyond the US. UK-based work is far more limited, however, and where it does exist the work focuses on drag and its operation within metropolitan spaces. A pertinent example is the work of Sarah Thornton (1995). Their edited work Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital (1995) is a seminal collection of essays that offers a multidimensional exploration of the dynamic club scenes in the UK during the 1990s. Among its

diverse topics, several chapters delve into the vibrant world of drag culture within these urban environments, exploring its intricate intersections with music, media, and the formation of subcultural identities. Whilst this work provides a nuanced perspective on the place of drag in urban areas such as London and its intricate links with specific music genres, styles, and subcultural movements, which Thornton argues helps to shape the sonic landscapes of UK club scenes, this work is limited. Not only is its focus solely metropolitan, but the work utilises drag as only a supplementary aspect of their overall discussion.

Work that primarily focuses on exploring drag in UK-based metropolitan contexts can be found, but they are rare. The recent edited book volumes by Edwards and Farrier (2019, A, B) offer contemporary intellectual perspectives on various aspects of UK-based drag performance. They delve into how performers navigate national and international stages, examining the shifts brought about by the mainstreaming of drag in today's societal and historical context. Furthermore, these volumes conduct thorough investigations into the historical narratives and communities that have shaped drag culture over time. Whilst this work provides intellectual insights into UK-based drag and the complexities of the communities they are involved in, works with this focus are uncommon.

There is however much existing work on the current state of queer nightlife in UK contexts, and since this thesis contributes to this focus, it is important to recognise this literature accordingly. Ben Campkin's Queer Premises (2023) offers a comprehensive exploration of LGBTQIA+ nightlife in urban environments, with a particular focus on the vibrant drag scene within the UK. Focusing on the evolution of these spaces since the 1980s, Campkin's work sheds light on the pivotal role that drag performances have played in shaping the social, cultural, and political landscape of the city. One of the key contributions of Campkin's book is its attention to the spatial dimensions of drag culture, where Campkin traces the geographical shifts and transformations of LGBTQ+ venues in London over the past few decades. By documenting the rise and fall of drag bars, clubs, and performance spaces, the book offers insights into how changes in urban development, gentrification, and LGBTQIA+ activism have impacted the accessibility and visibility of drag within the city. Additionally, Campkin's work provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing drag performers in contemporary London. By examining issues such as commercialisation, regulation, and changing social attitudes, the book offers valuable insights into the ongoing struggles for recognition and acceptance within mainstream society. Whilst the book provides a rich insight into the dynamics of LGBTQIA+ venues in the UK, the scope of this work is limited to its metropolitan context with its sole focus on London.

Insightful work that is also limited by this metropolitan scope is the recent book by Amin Ghaziani (2024) which, through an ethnographic approach, explores the changing dynamics of queer nightlife in the UK due to the widely discussed closure of all nightlife during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this closure pandemic, it is queer nightlife that has suffered disproportionately. This disproportionate and persistent closure of queer venues is most notably discussed in a study by Campkin and Marshall (2017), which has sparked further enquiry from Greig (2019), Hopkins (2021), and Ghaziani (2024). Ghaziani's research offers a refreshing and optimistic outlook on the impact of closures on queer nightlife. Despite acknowledging the undeniable negative consequences for queer communities, Ghaziani suggests that these closures have catalysed a transformation within queer nightlife, fostering a shift towards more vibrant and inclusive forms of expression. Particularly noteworthy is the emergence of queer spaces operating outside the traditional confines of bustling city nightlife sectors, gravitating towards underground and unconventional venues. This evolution signifies a resilience and adaptability within queer communities, as they navigate the challenges posed by closures and reimagine the landscape of nightlife. By exploring these shifts, Ghaziani's work sheds light on the innovative ways in which queer individuals and communities are reclaiming spaces and shaping their own narratives.

However, it is important to recognise the limitations of Ghaziani's study, primarily its narrow focus on London and the metropolitan context. While the insights gleaned from London's experience are valuable, they may not fully capture the diverse range of experiences and responses to closures in lesser-metropolitan areas. Thus, while Ghaziani's research offers valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of queer nightlife, there remains a need for further exploration of how these transformations manifest in different geographical contexts. By broadening the scope of inquiry to encompass lesser-metropolitan regions, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the nuanced ways in which queer communities are reshaping nightlife in response to closures. As I noted in an article, this raises questions around the work's optimism, and if the study can be applied to lesser-metropolitan regions:

> I can't help but feel that the optimism expressed in this book is reserved for cities like London and Manchester which, historically, have always possessed thriving queer scenes. What about areas that have not undergone these same evolutionary processes? The queer underground of the big city is moving, adapting, evolving, as Ghaziani contends. But what if we travel further afar to UK villages and towns? How does that underground operate there? Does it even exist? Are the same opportunities to experience these new forms of nightlife that Ghaziani explores available to smaller, outlying communities? (Ditch, 2024).

Studies exploring the nuances of lesser-metropolitan drag scenes are essential to unravelling how they function in ways that are both akin to and distinct from their metropolitan counterparts, thereby impacting LGBTQIA+ communities in varied manners. Yet, despite their significance, scholarly attention devoted to these regions remains notably scant. By shining a spotlight on the complexities of drag and nightlife in lesser-metropolitan settings, this research not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also challenges the prevailing centrality of urban-focused studies. It underscores the need to acknowledge and analyse the diverse array of spaces where drag thrives, recognising the unique contributions and challenges faced by smaller locales within the broader LGBTQIA+ cultural landscape. Without such dedicated focus, our understanding of drag and its associated communities' risks being disproportionately centred on large-scale cities, inadvertently marginalising the experiences and contributions of LGBTQIA+ individuals and venues in lesser-metropolitan areas. By amplifying their voices and experiences, this research seeks to provide a more inclusive and nuanced portrayal of drag culture, ensuring that all communities receive the recognition and analytical exploration they deserve.

2.4) Social Consequences of Drag

This thesis undertakes a comprehensive examination of the experiences and viewpoints of local drag performers situated in lesser-metropolitan regions across the United Kingdom. Chapter 6 delves into the social ramifications of drag as an occupation on its practitioners. As such, it is imperative to acknowledge the existing literature that delves into this specific area of inquiry. Understanding the social consequences of drag as a profession reveals that performers negotiate with various intersecting factors, including identity, community dynamics, and societal norms. By delving into this facet of drag culture, this thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and challenges faced by drag performers in lesser-metropolitan areas. To contextualise this exploration, it is essential to review the current state of literature that addresses the social impact of drag as an occupation. By synthesising existing scholarship, this thesis aims to build upon prior research while also identifying gaps and areas for further investigation. Through this process, the work offers insights and contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding drag culture and its broader societal implications.

There are several examples of media-based works that explore the experiences of drag performers beyond their professional lives, examining the connections between drag as an occupation and its impact on their social well-being. These include renowned documentaries, most notably *Paris is Burning* (1990), that provide valuable perspectives on the social and emotional dimensions of drag as

a profession and highlight the challenges and triumphs faced by performers both on and offstage. Through *Paris is Burning*, director Jennie Livingston delves into the vibrant ballroom culture of New York City, offering a poignant portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community and its subcultural expressions. Through intimate interviews and captivating footage of ball competitions, the documentary captures the resilience of drag performers as they navigate issues of race, class, and gender identity.

As previously noted, Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* (1972) stands as a pioneering academic work that ethnographically explores the effects of drag performance on its practitioners in the US. It provides a rich tapestry of narratives, discussing the lived experiences of drag performers and their communities. By employing ethnographic methods such as interviews and observational footage, the documentary offers a nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and personal dimensions of drag as an occupation. Yet, both *Mother Camp* and *Paris is Burning*, whilst one is academic and one is not, are once again geographically specific to US contexts.

Further scholarly inquiry that closely examines the connection between drag occupations and their social repercussions on performers is currently prevalent, mirroring concurrent academic interest in drag within scholarly circles and its wider public visibility. Scholars such as Rupp and Taylor with their work *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2015) ethnographically provide wide insight into the lives and experiences of drag performers at a club in Florida. While the book provides valuable insights into the lives and performances of drag queens within this specific context, its scope is limited to the experiences of individuals associated with this establishment. As a result, the broader social dynamics, and experiences of drag performers outside of this venue are not adequately explored or represented. Additionally, the book's focus on a specific geographic location may limit its applicability to the diverse experiences of drag performers in other regions or cultural contexts. Further work by Taylor, Rupp, and Shapiro (2010) also examines the social and cultural implications of drag performance, highlighting how their engagement with drag shapes the social experiences and performances of its enactor but is once again limited by its geographical and participant scope since only two US case studies are used.

A notable contribution that delves deeper into the psychological and emotional experiences of performers, employing sociological methodologies, is evident in the research conducted by Knutson, Koch, Sneed, and Lee (2018). Their work serves as a source of inspiration for my own doctoral study. By employing rigorous sociological methods, Knutson et al. shed light on the nuanced psychological and emotional landscapes inhabited by performers, offering valuable insights into the complexities of their experiences within their associated drag industry. Their research not only enhances understandings of the individual experiences of performers but also underscores the importance of

sociological inquiry in illuminating the broader social dynamics at play within the drag community. Knutson (2017) undertakes similar research, albeit with a narrower focus on gender dysphoria, depression, and the level of involvement in performance among drag performers. Knutson's study delves into the intricate intersections of mental health and performance engagement within the drag community, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by performers beyond their onstage personas. Knutson and Koch (2019) further explore issues surrounding identity and emotion among cisgender drag performers. Their research delves into the multifaceted effects of performers' occupation on their personal lives outside of the drag scene. By examining the ways in which drag involvement shapes individuals' identities and emotional well-being, Knutson and Koch offer nuanced perspectives on the complex interplay between performance and lived experiences. These studies collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and psychological dimensions of drag performance, highlighting the diverse range of experiences within the drag community. This thesis aims to build upon their foundation, further exploring the intricate interplay between local performers individual experiences around their physical and mental wellbeing and their engagement with broader social structures within the realm of drag performance. Additionally, this research seeks to fill a gap in literature left by existing work by shifting its focus from the US to the UK. Furthermore, it aims to amplify the voices of participants by providing ample space for their perspectives to be explored—a luxury afforded by the size of this thesis, in contrast to the constraints of a smaller journal article, for example.

One aspect of this thesis' investigation into the experiences of local drag performers extends beyond their professional lives to scrutinise the broader impacts of drag on various facets of their existence. This analysis necessarily engages with neoliberal contexts, aiming to discern how economic and societal forces intersect with the personal lives of drag performers. Other research, such as that of Crookston (2018), closely aligns with this focus by elucidating how the efforts of drag performers frequently spill over into forms of unpaid labour, encroaching upon their personal time. However, Crookston's study does not adopt an ethnographic approach. While it still offers valuable insights, incorporating data collected directly from participants could potentially enhance the depth and richness of these analyses. Ethnographic methods, with their emphasis on immersive fieldwork and participant observation, have the potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of drag performers. By engaging directly with the voices and experiences of participants, researchers can capture the complexities and nuances of the drag culture in a more comprehensive manner.

Other facets explored within this thesis delve into the utilisation of social media platforms by local drag performers to cultivate additional streams of income and enhance their established self-brands

and professional reputations[2]. Consequently, it is imperative to also examine existing literature that delves into the intersection of social media entrepreneurship and the experiences of drag performers. Numerous scholars, such as Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017), as well as Allen (2022), have produced insightful research that highlights the burgeoning influence of influencer culture across various social media platforms in the contemporary digital landscape. Liu and Siu (2017) develop upon these discussions by detailing the importance of self-branding for individuals' growth within those same influencer cultures and economies, through a rigorous analysis of Instagram use. These academic studies not only shed light on the escalating prominence of influencers but also scrutinise this phenomenon through a critique of neoliberalism, delving into how neoliberal ideologies shape and influence the motivations and behaviours of individuals operating within this culture. By examining the interplay between influencer culture and neoliberalism, these scholarly approaches offer nuanced insights into the evolving dynamics of social media influence and its broader socio-economic implications.

Whilst the literature referenced above, with their focuses on social media and influencer culture/economies, are insightful for my examination of drag performers' use of social media platforms for entrepreneurial purposes, they are somewhat limited since their focus is not specifically on drag. Very little work explores the links between these same influencer cultures and neoliberalism *alongside* considerations of their effect on drag performance and its associated performers themselves.

Scholars like Feldman and Hakim (2020) offer valuable insights into the pivotal role of social media in the increasing visibility and popularity of drag culture. They also critique the political implications of this process that they coin as 'celebrification'. However, this work lacks an ethnographic approach and does not directly investigate how drag performers themselves utilise social media platforms. While their discussions provide theoretical insights, a more in-depth exploration of the actual practices and experiences of performers on social media platforms could offer a richer understanding of the complexities inherent in the intersection of drag culture and digital media. Integrating ethnographic methods could provide a deeper dive into the lived experiences and strategies of drag performers as they navigate the digital landscape, contributing to a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between social media and drag performance.

In their study examining the costuming rituals of drag culture within virtual social media-based settings (Sandoval, 2018), Sandoval delves deeper into the utilisation of social media platforms by drag performers themselves. While their work critically examines the social media practices of *RPDR*

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[2] This is explored thoroughly in Chapter 7.

alumni, it falls short in its consideration of performers at the local level. Additionally, the study lacks a focus on the entrepreneurial potential of social media use for these same local performers. By expanding the scope of analysis to include a broader range of drag performers and exploring the entrepreneurial aspects of social media engagement, researchers can offer a more comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms intersect with drag culture at various levels. Such insights can illuminate the diverse strategies and experiences of drag performers as they navigate the digital landscape and harness its potential for personal and professional advancement.

Lingel and Golub (2015) offer an investigation into the sociotechnical aspects of drag practices in online communication utilising data obtained in Brooklyn. They conduct a thorough analysis of performer interactions on Facebook, examining the construction of identities through these interactions. While this study sheds light on many of the identity politics addressed in this thesis, it is constrained by its geographical and platform-specific scope, focusing solely on Facebook interactions within Brooklyn. Throughout this thesis, I argue that alternative social media platforms, particularly Instagram, promise the potential of diverse avenues for performers to enhance their reputational standing and potentially augment their personal income streams[3]. This seeks to fill the gap left by literature such as the aforementioned studies.

Private Dancers: Social Media Platforms and Contemporary New York Drag Performance by Nordeen (2014) is more closely related to the focus of this thesis, since it explores the intersection of social media platforms and drag performance in the context of contemporary New York. The study begins to investigate how drag performers utilise social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to engage with audiences and promote their performances. Nordeen examines how these digital platforms have become integral tools for drag performers to connect with fans, share their artistry, and navigate the ever-evolving landscape of performance art in the digital age. Through a combination of interviews, ethnographic observations, and analysis of online content, Nordeen provides insights into the transformative impact of social media on the practice and reception of drag performance in contemporary New York. While the study's focus is relevant to the topic at hand, its scope is limited, primarily because it only examines performers from New York and consequently, the US.

2.5) Claim to Originality

This thesis is devoted to the exploration of contemporary expressions of drag culture, while also examining its intricate relationship with mainstream phenomena like *RPDR*. However, a notable gap

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[3] These promises will be challenged and investigated in Chapter 7.

exists in the literature, as much of the focus in existing literature has been on major metropolitan areas, inadvertently neglecting the vibrant LGBTQIA+ communities thriving in smaller urban centres and lesser-known locales. There is a pressing need for research that delves into the unique dynamics of drag culture and LGBTQIA+ life in these lesser-metropolitan areas. Despite their lower visibility, these communities are equally significant and contribute immensely to the cultural landscape. Moreover, critical examination of the lives and experiences of drag performers predominantly has a US-based geographical focus. While there is some UK-based material available, it tends to concentrate on the country's metropolises, leaving a gap in understanding the experiences of drag performers in smaller and lesser-known locales. By broadening scholarly attention beyond major cities, researchers can uncover the nuanced ways in which drag performers navigate and enrich the fabric of smaller urban centres. This inclusive approach not only expands our understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences but also highlights the resilience and creativity of drag performers across diverse geographical contexts. It underscores the importance of documenting LGBTQIA+ cultures wherever they exist, whether in the bustling streets of iconic metropolises or in underrepresented lesser-metropolitan UK settings like Nottingham. In essence, this thesis seeks to fill the gap in the literature by shining a spotlight on the often overlooked drag scenes and LGBTQIA+ communities in smaller urban centres, emphasising their significance and contributions to the broader queer cultural landscape. Through this exploration, this work aims to foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of drag culture while acknowledging the diversity and vibrancy of LGBTQIA+ communities worldwide.

The work explores the intricacies of the lives and viewpoints of local drag performers residing in lesser-metropolitan regions across the United Kingdom. Through in-depth exploration and analysis, it aims to shed light on the unique challenges, triumphs, and contributions of these drag artists within their respective communities. It does so by considering how their occupational *and* personal lives are informed and altered by neoliberal ideology and the mainstreaming of drag culturally. These discussions and qualitative inquiry are led by participant narratives, and through this the thesis seeks to offer nuanced insights into the lived experiences of local drag performers, thereby enriching our understanding of drag culture and LGBTQ+ life in the UK's smaller urban locales. Through the integration of theoretical and methodological frameworks, these narratives uncover the complexities of drag performers' personal lives and the profound effects that their occupation has on their mental health and physical well-being. This research aims to bridge the gaps identified in the literature regarding social media utilization by examining how local performers strategically leverage platforms like Instagram for entrepreneurial purposes. Additionally, it explores how this utilisation transcends boundaries between identity, intersecting with both the personal and occupational domains of local performers. By delving into these intersections, the study provides further understanding of the

multifaceted impacts of drag performance on performers' lives, highlighting the nuanced dynamics at play within drag communities local to lesser-metropolitan scenes. It also intends to build upon existing literature that analyses the importance of *RPDR* to alterations of drag culturally, by directly exploring the effects of its mainstreaming on performers at UK-based local levels, as understood through performers' experiences and perceptions.

Moreover, existing research often fails to incorporate the voices and lived experiences of drag performers themselves when exploring the dynamics of the drag industry. While contemporary academic inquiry aims to elucidate the connections between drag industries and neoliberalism, there remains a glaring gap in fully investigating these phenomena from the perspectives of the performers themselves. This study addresses this deficiency by utilising the voices and experiences of drag performers, thereby offering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent within the drag industry. By amplifying the perspectives of those directly involved in drag culture, this research seeks to provide valuable insights that may have been previously overlooked or marginalised in scholarly discourse.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter seeks to communicate the methodological processes, considerations and frameworks that construct this ethnographic project. This project works towards a comprehensive exploration of the complex socioeconomic dimensions of regional drag performance scenes in lesser-metropolitan contexts (the Midlands), investigating how these cultures of drag performance are influenced by the communities and economies of those regions. Every effort has been made to ensure that this methodology allows for rich data collection and analyses, in addition to aid the researcher to address the projects research aims.

The methodology employed was driven by the singular goal of conducting a sociologically rigorous examination of drag communities in Nottingham. Central to this endeavour was the facilitation of a platform whereon marginalised participants could freely articulate their perceptions and experiences anonymously. I contextualise and theorise these voices, thereby enabling a comprehensive analysis of their narratives. Moreover, my aim is to delve into the dynamics of the Nottingham drag scene, elucidating its impact on the individuals and communities it comprises. In doing so, I seek to provide a critical assessment of the scene, mindful of its contemporary neoliberal backdrop. It is disheartening to observe that amidst discussions surrounding these neoliberal dynamics—how they shape drag culture, consumption patterns, and expectations—there exists a glaring oversight: a failure to appreciate the perspectives of the performers themselves. Instead, the discourse often remains distant, analysing the industry from a detached vantage point. This represents a significant blind spot in current debates, one that this project and its methodological framework are designed to occupy.

The chapter begins with a thorough examination of the project's research philosophy, type, strategy, and questions, as well as considerations of time horizons, sampling strategy and criteria, preliminary studies, and methods of data collection and analysis. The latter part of the chapter scrutinises the project's methodology in juxtaposition with existing scholarly works. Following this, the chapter candidly addresses the inevitable limitations of this methodology in relation to the project's focal points. It then delves into an exploration of the ethical considerations woven into every facet of the methodological process. Ultimately, it concludes with a reflective discussion, presenting overarching justifications for the methodological choices made.

3.1) Overarching Research Design

Before attempting to establish any kind of research methodology, a project and research focus needed to be identified (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 47). While I've covered this focus in Chapter 2 (Literature Review) and will delve deeper into it in this chapter through reflections on my role as a researcher, a constructive way to begin this section is to explore how this focus developed personally. As a queer cisgender male my immersion in contemporary queer cultures and communities, coupled with my observations of the ongoing commodification of this culture and the prominent role of drag in local and global queer cultural landscapes, sparked a profound academic interest in the cultural significance of drag. My personal experiences have shaped my academic interest in this field. It all began with my regular attendance at Nottingham's drag performances in local bars, nightclubs, and larger venues hosting internationally acclaimed drag stars. I noticed a striking absence of LGBTQIA+ safe spaces in the city, despite initiatives like the pride flags adorning the streets of Hockley (a Nottingham borough), aimed at fostering a sense of LGBTQIA+ safety. Despite this, there existed a richly diverse community of individuals both performing in and attending drag events across the city, with some even adopting drag personas while spectating. This underlined the scarcity of venues accommodating drag performers, resulting in an oversaturation of talent in the few spaces available.

These observations prompted significant inquiries regarding Nottingham's identity as a locale. These inquiries revolved around the city's enthusiasm for drag despite the scarcity of dedicated queer venues. Moreover, through the literature review, I discerned a void in existing scholarship concerning sociological insights into the lived experiences of performers which shape regional performance scenes, particularly in locales beyond major American cities or London.

Research questions were created immediately after identifying this focus, to act as a crux to the project which informed and guided it throughout research progression. The research questions below are finalised and edited versions which have been through processes of adaptation and development since the beginning stages of this project: 'initial set[s] of research questions [are] provisional' and this 'provisionality is maintained through the research process' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 59). This is especially relevant in relation to the secondary research questions below which allow for the wider questions to be interrogated in a more nuanced manner.

Primary Research Questions

- What are the socioeconomic dimensions of regional drag scenes within Nottingham and other surrounding mid-sized cities in the Midlands?
- In what ways are drag performers who work in Nottingham affected socioeconomically by these dimensions?

- How have these socioeconomic dimensions been exploited?

- How do cultures and consumptions of drag performance mobilise the communities and economies of those same regions/places?

Secondary Research Questions

- How have neoliberal attitudes and contexts infiltrated drag performance and its associated communities/cultures?

- What is the importance of social media to performers local to Nottingham and how is this effected by these neoliberal ideologies?

- How can textual analysis be combined with grounded ethnographic and sociological research in an interdisciplinary manner?

The research questions aim to delve into the socioeconomic considerations for drag performers in the Midlands, exploring how their lives intersect with social media, geographical context, and neoliberal contexts within their communities. They further seek to bridge various research domains to establish an interdisciplinary framework. Moreover, they emphasise the importance of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, prompting critical reflection on their role and position within the research process. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the study of drag performance cultures in regional settings. Consequently, these questions 'define the project', 'set boundaries', 'give direction', and help to define the successes of the project thus helping the researcher (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 59).

The proposed methodology aligns with a constructivist research paradigm, which emphasises the dynamic and socially constructed nature of reality. Within this paradigm, the project acknowledges that social phenomena, such as those explored in this thesis, are continuously shaped and reshaped through social interactions and interpretations. At its core, the project embraces social constructionism, a theoretical framework that underscores the role of social processes in shaping individuals' understandings of the world. By employing this perspective, the research aims to unveil the multifaceted layers of meaning embedded within the subject matter, recognising that these meanings are not fixed but rather contingent upon the cultural, historical, and interpersonal contexts in which they emerge (Galbin, 2014). Furthermore, the epistemological stance taken is interpretative, allowing for the recognition of participants' subjectivity and rejecting the notion of objective truth. Instead, the research prioritises the exploration of participants' understandings, experiences, and perceptions, viewing them as valuable sources of knowledge. This approach encourages reflexivity on

the part of both the researcher and the participants, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexities and nuances inherent in the research process.

By embracing a constructivist paradigm and an interpretative epistemology, the project seeks to generate rich and nuanced insights into the subject matter, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics at play within the context of drag performance communities in the Midlands. This ontology (or 'the study of being') and epistemology which is 'concerned with the nature and forms' of knowledge (Scotland, 2012, 9), constructs an interpretative paradigm which is reflected by the methods employed. The type of research practiced in this work also reflects these epistemological and ontological positionings, in relying on qualitative data that allows participants freedom and motivation to express their perceptions and thoughts to the researcher, to work towards holistic understandings of research. Although restricted amounts of quantitative data were collected (as in later discussion of social media statistics), this data was intended to supplement the qualitative analyses conducted. It should also be noted here this project will be approached through lenses that are shaped by theatrical, gender-based, queer and sociological frameworks, since they align so closely with the overarching project focus.

This project, in its attempt to understand and explore the experiences and perceptions of local drag performers socioeconomically and the ontological positioning of the location in which they perform on those communities, lends itself seamlessly to an ethnographic methodology. Consequently, this project will engage with an ethnographic approach, as the purpose of this research is to obtain a more developed comprehension of drag performance's mobilisation of communities within Nottingham and other medium-sized cities in the Midlands.

3.2) Preliminary Studies

Following a comprehensive literature review, a preliminary study was conducted, yielding a refined set of secondary research questions. These questions underscored the pivotal role of social media platforms, notably Instagram, for drag performers in Nottingham who leverage them to pursue the rewards of entrepreneurial behaviours through virtual actions. These behaviours are intricately intertwined with the neoliberal landscapes that influence the drag industries, cultures, and communities. Published in the *MAKINGS Journal* (Ditch, 2021), this study helped enrich the ethnographic quality of the overarching project. It served as a foundation for scoping the local geographic area, identifying potential participants, and discerning how their behaviours are shaped by neoliberal contexts. This initial exploration facilitated the formulation of nuanced prompts and questions for subsequent interviews, ensuring the collection of rich and diverse data. By laying this

groundwork, the broader project was primed to delve deeper into the complex interplay between drag performance, social media, and neoliberalism within the Nottingham community and similar settings across the Midlands. Explorations of this study are made in Chapter 7 when discussing the importance of social media and the performers' potential dependence on it.

The data collection for this preliminary study relied on media searches for Nottingham-based drag performers' Instagram profiles. These profiles were obtained 'unobtrusively through google searches using the key words: "Drag", "Drag Queen", "Drag King", "Drag Performer", "Instagram" and "Nottingham"' (Ditch, 2021, 3) and 'from these profiles the following were recorded, the most recent 10 posts of each profile (images, captions, comment sections), the number of others followed by the participant, the number of those following the participant, and the total number of posts by the participant)' (Ditch, 2021, 3). Selection criteria were implemented for participant profiles: no specific gender-identification or age was indicated and participants simply needed to be 'self-identified performers of drag who frequent, highlight and/or construct Nottingham's drag scene through their profiles' (Ditch, 2021, 3). Twenty profiles were selected, anonymised, numbered and the then most recent 10 posts from each profile were utilised leading to a total number of 200 images/posts being analysed, and these were collected within four hours to limit potential changes in datasets. Two forms of data analysis were used to form a triangulation. The first of these was a text-based and image-based latent content analysis on existing literature and captions, comments, and interactions through profile posts, in addition to images from profile posts. Lee and Kim describe latent content analysis as a form of analysis where 'researchers can guarantee objectivity by carrying out their analyses according to explicit rules that enable different investigators to obtain the same results from the same messages or documents' (2001, 305). Latent content analysis differs from alternative forms of content analysis (such as manifest content analysis) since it is specifically utilised to 'find the underlying meaning of the contents' of the subject analysed (Lee and Kim, 2001, 305). This is then of relevance to this interpretive study. The second form of data analysis was a form of descriptive quasi-quantitative analysis, which assesses frequency distribution (of both text and simple statistics – such as social media engagements) and variability across datasets.

Qualitative methods were employed to examine how drag performers use Instagram and how these uses could be considered entrepreneurial, whilst descriptive quasi-quantitative data analysis offered insight into how often these utilisations occur and gave indications of what might lead to differing 'success' rates of performers' (Ditch, 2021, 4). Descriptive analysis was used to create data on 'the regularity of posts, how often certain trends occurred within the small population's data, and the overall engagement rates of each participant (all posts/likes/comments divided by total followers)' (Ditch, 2014, 4). Qualitative text-based content analysis drew out themes and formed discussion

points that could be considered alongside academic writings whilst also considering post captions and the attached comment sections of participant profiles. The last method of analysis uses qualitative image-based content analysis 'to seek trends, themes, and develop points of discussion based on the visual imagery displayed on the participant's profiles [posts]' (Ditch, 2014, 4).

Before discussing the data collection sections of this methodology, my positionality and entry into the field should be recognised. Since this methodology is an ethnographic inquiry into lesser-metropolitan drag scenes, I moved to the city at the beginning of the research process – learning its geographies and beginning engagement with its LGBTQIA+ communities. Entering this research project as a male-identifying homosexual provides a distinctive lens through which to engage with the drag culture and its socioeconomic dimensions. A kind of shared identity with the LGBTQIA+ community can create an immediate sense of trust and understanding with participants, fostering a supportive environment that encourages open dialogue. This rapport can be especially crucial in qualitative research, where personal narratives and lived experiences are central to the findings, especially when such topics can become sensitive. Building rapport increases the potential for participants to feel more comfortable sharing their stories, challenges, and insights. When participants perceive you as an LGBTQIA+ ally who genuinely understands the nuances of their experiences, they can be more likely to provide deeper, more candid reflections. This can lead to richer qualitative data, revealing the complexities of how socioeconomic factors shape their lives and careers within the drag scene. I believe that the richness and depth of the experiences revealed throughout my data collection process cements these claims. Moreover, my positionality granted me with somewhat of an insider's perspective, despite not being a drag performer myself, which enabled me to ask more informed questions and engage in nuanced discussions. I felt comfortable in navigating sensitive topics—such as the impacts of neoliberalism or issues of exploitation—without alienating participants, as we shared a common cultural context. However, it was essential to remain conscious of my own biases and strive for reflexivity throughout the research process by acknowledging how my background could influence my interpretation of such discussions.

Ultimately, my identity and positionality in the research not only enriched my engagement with participants but also enhanced the overall depth of the research, providing insights that might otherwise remain unvoiced. By approaching the study with authenticity and empathy, I believe the work in this thesis illuminates the intersections of drag culture, community mobilisation, and socioeconomic realities in a meaningful way.

3.3) Data Collection

The methodology adopted was a triangulated approach to data collection, referring to the widely utilised academic strategy which involves 'the use of multiple sources to enhance the rigour of the research' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 171). Utilising a triangulation of data collection methods allow movement towards more holistic interpretations and understandings of the research topic, but also work to enhance the validity of that data through cross verification: 'triangulation can help to counter all of the threats to validity' in research (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 171). Moreover, through methodological triangulation the research works to minimise bias and assess any potential problems. This triangulation included: (i) the creation of preliminary and structured literary searches to inform/create literature reviews to illuminate all primary data collected, ii) ethnographic semi-structured interviews with drag performers working in Nottingham (and a smaller amount of Manchester-based participants) to gain more insight into social perceptions of drag performance from drag performers, (iii) participant observations on live drag performances of Nottingham-based participants (and a smaller number of Manchester-based participants), during which field notes and micro-ethnographic observations would be taken for later use. It should be noted that all data collection methods were conducted over two years.

Figure 1: Data Collection Triangulation
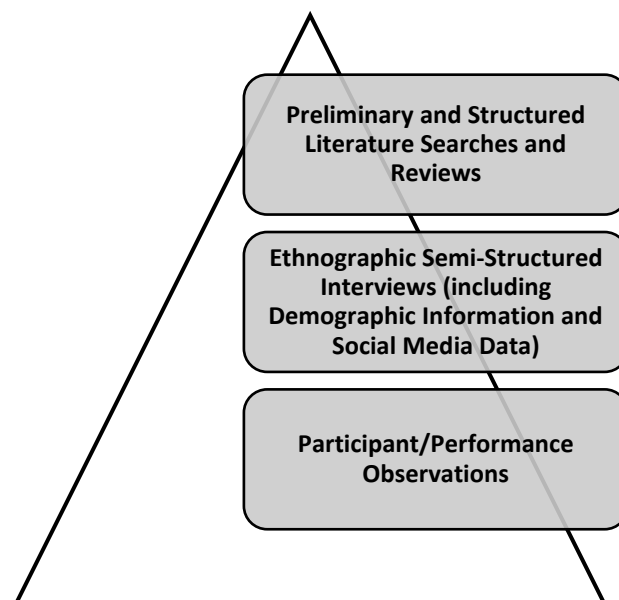
(Figure 1)

3.31) Preliminary and Structured Literature Searches and Reviews

The project began with a preliminary literature search on existing work that utilised drag as a specific point of focus, regardless of the research field. This was to develop a nuanced lens with which to address the topic of drag and its debated neo-liberalisation and help to further identify gaps in existing academic knowledge. Therefore, these searches exposed the 'main gaps in knowledge' to identify 'areas of dispute and uncertainty' and 'appropriate research methodologies' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 52). Several resources were utilised in these searches and reviews including library searches, electronic databases, and search engines (referring to Google Scholar) all of which are deemed by Robson and McCartan to be useful methods to obtain information in systematic literature reviews (2016, 52-4). To create a review systematically Gough, Oliver and Thomas in their book on *Systematic Reviews* state that there are three key activities involved. The first key activity they identify is 'mapping the research [field]' which includes the identification and description of all relevant existing research to the project and research questions (2013, 5). Secondly, they detail the need for 'critically appraising research reports in a systematic manner' and they conclude this process with 'bringing together the findings into a coherent statement' (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas, 2013, 5). This framework was utilised in this study for all literature searches/reviews including the preliminary ones conducted at the beginning of the research process, and to complete the literature review in this thesis.

3.32) Ethnographic Semi-Structured Interviews

In this project, online participant interviews were utilised as the primary data collection method, although they 'lend themselves well to use in combination with other methods' for purposes of triangulation (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 285). This was selected as a primary data collection method for several reasons. Interviews are a 'flexible and adaptable way of finding things out' and allowing the potential for opening windows to 'what lies behind our actions' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 286). Considering that the research questions might delve into personal and sensitive topics with participants, particularly concerning their lived experiences as drag performers, interviews were selected as the most advantageous means of probing 'interesting responses and [exploring] underlying motives' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 286) in ways that alternative methods may not achieve, and to do so in an ethically mindful manner that prioritises participant safeguarding. It was important to allow for participants to express their experiences and perceptions freely but also since the research questions allow for a broad range of themes to be covered, the participants needed to be guided to remain focused within interviews. Consequently, semi-structured interviews were 'conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time' and employed 'a blend of closed and

open-ended questions' (Adams, 2015, 493). These types of interviews, through their use of structured questions *and* their semi-open approach to how these questions are answered and employed allow for dialogue to 'meander around the topics' and therefore encourage interviewees to 'delve into unforeseen issues' (Adams, 2015, 493). This would be advantageous since the first two primary research questions promote enquiries into both the socioeconomic dimensions of Nottingham's drag scene and their consequences on the drag performers constructing them, therefore allowing participants to provide new insights that better frame subsequent analyses of those dimensions.

The participants selected obviously needed to be able to provide 'knowledge and experience about the particular focus of the study' (DeMarrais, 2004, 59). Therefore, a selection criterion was established to ensure the relevance of data to the study. Participants had to refer to themselves as a drag performer and had to have had experience performing in and being engaged with the Nottingham-based drag community. There were no criteria set around the age or gender of the participants, nor was there a guideline set for the level of experience of the performers (thus encouraging differing perspectives in the sample population). Participants were identified in several ways including through social media searches on Instagram (using the hashtags: drag performer, Nottingham drag, drag queen, drag king, and queer Nottingham). Another identification method was 'snowball sampling' where a participant would suggest 'someone else you should contact' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 160).

Following this, an interview guide was constructed for use with participants. Several considerations were considered when creating this guide, informed by DeMarrais, who states that a useful interview guide should include some 'short clear questions' which 'lead to detailed responses', 'questions that ask participants to recall specific events or experiences in detail' to 'encourage fuller narratives', and some 'broad open-ended questions' (2004, 61-3). The final interview guide included examples of each of these and was additionally split into 'phases' which, as DeMarrais states, is helpful for the participant (2004, 63), since it clearly divides topics of conversation (particularly important here since interviews lasted for at least 90 minutes). These phases were themed, starting with less probing questions and finishing with lighter reflexive questions. The themed sections were as follows: (i) Demographic Information, (ii) Drag Experience and General Perception, (iii) Motivations and Aspirations, (iv) Location, (v) Drag as Industry, (vi) Social Media and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, (vii) The Effect of Drag on the Personal. This interview guide can be seen in the appendix of this thesis.

To determine the suitability of the interview guide for the project and to ensure its effectiveness in capturing the desired data and nuances, a pilot study was undertaken (different to the preliminary social media scoping study referred to above). A pilot study is 'a small-scale version of the real thing'

so that 'feasibility can be checked' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 156). For this pilot study, three interviews were conducted with drag participants who fit the previously discussed sample criteria, except the geographic location in which they needed to have had experience was Lincoln. Lincoln was chosen as I had prior connections with its drag scene to allow for immediate participation from performers, and since it is also a medium-sized city in the Midlands. This was important since the sample could be kept small, but also because its geographical context is broadly comparable to Nottingham, due to its lesser-metropolitan city status. Initially it was estimated that the interviews would last 60 minutes. However, the pilot study interviews lasted around 90-120 minutes each. Although long, the richness of data and depth of experiential narratives being obtained was so useful, that the decision was made to not shorten the interview guide but instead change the recommended interview time to 90-120 minutes to allow for this depth of data to be obtained. As this was a longer interview time, participants were advised that they could stop at any time to prevent interview-fatigue. Before approaching the Nottingham-based participants identified through the selection criteria for interviews, amendments to the interview guide were made.

At the beginning of the process, the aim was to interview 20-25 participants. However, as the pilot study highlighted, the times planned initially were a lot shorter than the interviews turned out to be. Therefore, as so much data was being collected and so much time was being utilised in interviews, their subsequent transcriptions and analyses, it was decided to lower this population to 15 participants from Nottingham as the number of participants appropriate for a project is dependent on the 'richness of the interviews' and 'the extent to which the participants are able to respond to the research purpose and questions' (DeMarrais, 2004, 60). An additional 5 participants from Manchester were also interviewed using the same interview question sheets and prompts, but with minor adjustments (to location names) for a comparative study (detailed later in this chapter). The inclusion of a lower population of Manchester-based participants is used to give an additional comparative aspect to this methodology and thesis, whereby these examples will be used as a point of contrast to Nottingham-based interviews in later discussions, to probe the importance of local specificity in this project. Lowering the participant population established feasibility within the methodology, whilst still obtaining 'perspectives of more than just a few people' (Adams, 2015, 495). All participants were approached unobtrusively via Instagram direct messages, which provided a platform to connect with a wide variety of performers local to Nottingham. The data collected through this method remains almost completely qualitative, relying on the conversation and dialogue from the participants.

However, there is another aspect to consider in the data collection process. One hour before each interview, quantitative social media statistics were taken from each participants' Instagram profile. This reflects the kinds of quantitative statistics that were obtained for the preliminary social media

study conducted at the beginning of this process. These statistics were: (i) how many followers the performer had, (ii) how many profiles the performer was following, (iii) the ratio between followers and profiles followed, (iv) the total number of posts on the profile, and (v) accumulative likes on the profile's last ten posts. These all help to communicate and convey the online influence and reach of each performer at the time of the interview, which can then be used to corroborate and/or contrast later discussions.

As this data collection began during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided that all interviews would be conducted online through recorded Zoom meetings. This was to safeguard both participants and the researcher. Additionally, completing these interviews via an online platform allowed for a leniency with interview times and dates, especially since several of the participants had a full-time occupation in addition to working as drag performers. This also meant that participants were able to feel more relaxed, or at least more in control, since they could choose their own interview surroundings. Therefore, several interviews were held on weekday evenings, weekends, or early mornings. Participants were asked to provide the researcher with times and dates that would be most suitable for them, and the researcher was able to either accommodate that or adapt to a different time mutually convenient for both parties. Interview time lengths initially, as described above, lasted between 90 minutes and 120 minutes. This allowed for a rapport to be built between researcher and the participant resulting in more personal/anecdotal data that could serve the project's intentions whilst providing participants from marginalised communities with a voice to reflect on their own careers and experiences and share them. Additionally, all interview participants were given a consent form to sign, a debriefing sheet with helpful information and contact numbers to ensure all participants were safeguarded. These debriefing sheets and consent forms are included in the appendix of this thesis. Additionally, all interviews were conducted in accordance with Nottingham Trent University's ethical clearance procedures, and the researcher was granted ethical approval from the institution before conducting any interviews. The interview data collected and analysed during this research plays a central role in the discussion sections of this thesis, more so than other types of data. I aimed for this project to be driven by the voices of those actively shaping the drag scenes under investigation, allowing for a deeper understanding of their experiences in relation to the nuanced socioeconomic contexts surrounding them. The insights gained from these interviews were crucial to examining Nottingham's drag scene and complemented my own academic readings on the complexities of drag and its socioeconomic dimensions. Moreover, given that the focus on lesser-metropolitan UK drag scenes is often overlooked in existing literature, it was particularly important to centre local performers' perspectives in this work.

3.33) Participant/Performance Observations

The last method utilised in this triangulation is participant/performance observations. These included 20 Nottingham-based and 5 Manchester-based observations on live performances of participants that had also been interviewed. In-depth notes were taken on each of these in every participant observation, which all took place in Nottingham-based event locations including bars and nightclubs. These observation notes also began with a 'thick description' which produces 'descriptive data free from imposed external concepts and ideas' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 157) and allows the researcher to work towards understandings of the 'symbolic dimensions of social action' and therefore semiotically analyse concepts of cultural phenomena (Geertz, 1973, 30). The addition of thick descriptions in this form, alongside the nine points of observation may help to ethnographically ground the observations but also allows for an appreciation of their performative aspect assessing the types of performance and semiotic action that participants conduct. This is discussed later in this thesis, but these types of performative appreciations work towards potentially more informed inferences as to the performer's "success" and/or experience; and highlight potential motivations which can later be analysed in the context of neoliberal ideology. As with the previously discussed interviews, a smaller number of participant/performance observations were made in Manchester. These were conducted in the exact same manner as the Nottingham-based observations to allow for contrastive analysis regarding geographical specificity and points of difference.

Additionally, smaller-scale and less frequent observations were made at meetings at the *Nottingham Queer Arts Collective*, a Nottingham based group who hold 'monthly meetings' to 'bring together LGBTQIA+ artists' to 'appreciate, liberate and support our community and art' (Nottingham Playhouse, 2022). I attended two of these meetings on the advice of one the interview participants. Attendance at these sessions was utilised to engage with some drag performing participants, to build rapport and secure future interviews. Additionally, it was a way to further my self-positioning within Nottingham's queer and drag scenes. This observational method concludes the project's triangulation of data collection, which sought to build a robust and mixed-method approach to capture productive data to be utilises for analysis within this thesis.

These observations, while contributing rich, thick descriptions used throughout this thesis to contextualise subsequent discussions, served as a valuable complement to my primary data collection method: participant interviews. Engaging in these performance observations not only grounded my initial foray into the research field but also profoundly influenced my understanding of the queer scenes in Nottingham and Manchester. Through these experiences, I was able to learn and re-learn the intricate geographies and dynamics of the local LGBTQIA+ communities.

Moreover, these observations played a crucial role in my scoping studies for future participant involvement, helping me identify potential participants and understand more around their contexts. They also enriched my interpretations and research findings, providing a foundation rooted in the real-life experiences I witnessed. This dual approach—combining observational data with participant insights—allowed me to create a more nuanced narrative of the queer landscapes I explored, ensuring that my findings were not only informed by theoretical frameworks but also deeply connected to the lived realities of the communities involved.

3.4) Data Analysis

This section of the chapter will explore the analysis methods utilised to understand and dissect the data collected from the methods above. The qualitative data collected from the collection methods underwent two kinds of analysis. These were a thematic approach and a quasi-statistical approach. The thematic approach was applied to all three data collection methods indicated in the above sections. A specific step-by-step structure was applied to each dataset which is indicated in the figure below. Braun and Clarke created a six-phase approach to conduct these analyses and their process-structure (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 60-9). It should be stated here that the application NVIVO was utilised to aid my synthesis of data and help work against researcher bias.

Figure 2: Qualitative Thematic Analysis Process

| 1) Become Familiar with Data | 2) Generate Initial Data Codes and Label Codes | 3) Search for Themes and Group Labelled Codes into Themes | 4) Review Potential Themes | 5) Define and Name Themes | 6) Report Data |
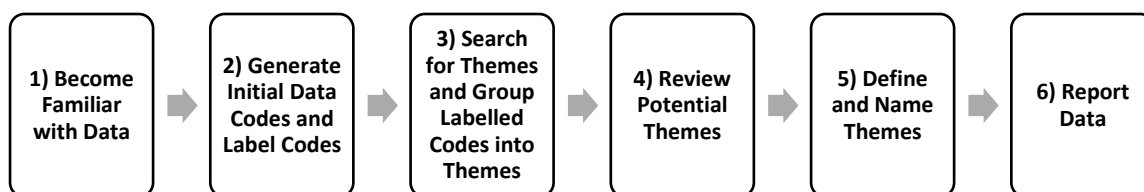
(Figure 2)

Becoming familiar with the data refers mainly to the researcher's immersion in the data through re-reading and re-listening to all data collected (specifically regarding participant interviews) (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 60). Repeated readings of listening to notes, transcriptions and interview audio were carried out, in the form of transcript annotations and note-making on notebooks/Microsoft Word documents. This phase was used to allow the researcher to 'become intimately familiar with your data set's content and to begin to notice things that might be relevant to your research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 61). This process was used to generate initial codes, which are the 'building blocks'

for analysis and 'describe the content' of small sections of data or 'go beyond the participants' meanings and provide an interpretation' of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 61). Some codes are inevitably repeated, although a new code was established if the data required it. An active process of theming then followed these steps, where choices were made by the researcher to shape the raw data into themes by searching for areas of similarity, clustering codes, and establishing sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 63). In the case of reviewing and analysing interview transcripts, direct participant quotes were often attached to themes and sub-themes. These themes were then reviewed and quality-checked by holding established 'themes against the collated extracts of data and to explore whether the theme works in relation to the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 65). Although definitions and names for themes has already been considered throughout the process, they were then reviewed for adequacy and checked to ensure if they were able to communicate the meaning of the data succinctly *and* cohesively. Lastly, the data was reported through a written form of dissemination, namely this thesis. Further disseminations included are publications such as the article written for the journal *MAKINGS* earlier, as well as a chapter in an upcoming edited book (currently in the final stages of peer review) the contents of which are collated from Chapter 4.

Quasi-statistical analysis was conducted on the participant interviews. Robson and McCartan consider quasi-statistical analysis to use 'word frequencies and inter-correlations as key methods of determining the relative importance of terms and concepts' (2016, 461). In creating this secondary numerical data, we can draw potential inferences from the frequency with which specifically selected lexis, terms, phrases, or references are used across the entire dataset from all participants. Processes of interpretation are then exerted on this numerical data, and they are used later in this thesis as supplementary points of discussion in arguments and discussions. Additional quasi-quantitative data analysis was also completed on the social media data collected from each participant's Instagram profile at the time of being interviewed, consisting of supplementary datasets and ratios being created and descriptively analysed. This analysis (also referred to earlier in this chapter) was performed on the regularity of posts, how often certain trends occurred within the small population's data, and the overall engagement rates of each participant (all posts/likes/comments divided by total followers).

3.5) Methodological Limitations

Whilst the scope, scale and focus of this project has been justified in terms of its attempt to address the blind-spots of existing literature and its associated research fields through its content and methodology, there are undoubtedly some potential limitations to the methodology presented here. Whilst the focus of this project is specific to Nottingham as an example of socioeconomic dimensions

found in medium-sized cities in the Midlands[4], there is a potential issue with research samples and participant selection. Whilst Nottingham's drag scene is relatively smaller than several other UK-based (and international) drag scenes, it is significantly larger than the 15 participants interviewed/observed in this ethnographic study. Consequently, the sample populations obtained through 'snowball' and 'purposive' sampling reflect only a portion of the community this project seeks to analyse (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 282). Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the inclusion of more participant interviews/observations was simply beyond the feasibility of this project. There were also issues encountered regarding diversity issues within the project's population sample. Despite my best efforts to ensure it was as diverse as possible, across variations of age, gender and sex, experience level and ethnicity, I did encounter some obstacles when pursuing this. Whilst the demographics of participants were diverse regarding age, experience, sex and gender, I had issues identifying and therefore approaching performers from different ethnic backgrounds. All participants identified as White/British. Upon discovering this issue, I began to include questions around diversity with participants to understand whether this lack of ethnic diversity reflects the Nottingham drag scene itself, to understand whether this was an issue in my sampling or simply the location. It seems, from both my own research and participant accounts, that there is a distinct lack of ethnic diversity in the drag scene within Nottingham and therefore it is understandable that my samples did not include someone who did not identify as White/British (which is discussed in more detail in later chapters).

Whilst the methods for data collection and analysis were specifically chosen for their applicability to this project's aims, intentions and focus, each have potential limitations which should be noted. Interviews specifically are associated with several limitations. Whilst they are intrinsic to the aims of this study, they are 'time-consuming' and can be subject to a 'lack of standardisation' which can raise concerns over 'reliability' and bias (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 286). To avoid potential biases and improve reliability, triangulation with other methods was employed. 'Open-ended questions' and 'prompts' were used to obtain information, whilst the researcher guided interviewers through the process and keep participants focused on questions asked as to not 'lose control' of the scenario (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 289). Regarding the constraints on participant observations, several factors must be considered, such as: capturing information that is 'unambiguous' and 'full'; the necessarily condensed nature of notes taken at the live event using 'abbreviations'; and the issue of 'observational biases' where issues of 'selective memory' and 'attention' may reduce the authenticity of data (Robson and McCartan, 2016, 330-1). To avoid this, three methods of recording were used including: abbreviated note taking, in-depth note taking, and thick readings. These methods of

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[4] This focus on Nottingham's typicality as a medium-sized Midlands-based city will be expanded upon in later chapters (particularly in Chapter 4).

observational documentation were also created utilising Robson and McCartan's guide for observational note taking referred to earlier in this chapter (2016, 328). Regarding interpretative thematic analysis, several issues have been identified by researchers relating to the reliability of this method. Firstly, 'without rigorous coding or careful consideration of underlying categories' this type of analysis can potentially provide studies with a 'lack of compelling evidence' (Lochmiller, 2021, 2043). This has been avoided through a carefully considered and reviewed process for theme creation within the analysis process described earlier in this chapter, and since thematic analysis is considerably 'dependent on well-formulated research questions' (Lochmiller, 2021, 2043) these questions were specifically formed to draw nuanced themes from the data as well as guiding the research process itself.

3.6) Ethics and Legacy

This section communicates all ethical considerations examined during this project's research process, whilst also considering the potential legacies that the project promotes. Additionally, the section will close with an exploration of the researcher's role in the project and its implications.

Several ethical issues were taken into consideration for the preliminary study discussed in the earlier section of this chapter. The need for consent in studies that utilise virtual public platforms such as Instagram is a widely debated area in related research domains. Since this study has a focus on publicly accessible social media profiles found through Google searches and without the need for the researcher to obtain an account created through the platform's architecture through using key words, consent was not considered necessary here. This is since all data used was classed as 'extant data', referring to the datasets which have 'no direct contact with individual participants' and includes 'posts or exchanges of visual media' and 'text-based communication' (Salmons, 2017, 183). Despite the lack of participant consent in this study, due to the sole use of extant data, approval was obtained from Nottingham Trent University's Research Ethics Committee. Salmons, an expert on designing qualitative frameworks in online and virtual settings, corroborates that this type of extant data gathering can be 'conducted without informed consent' from participants (2017, 185). However, additional precautions were taken to safeguard participants, including the anonymisation of all data (written and visual).

Further ethical considerations were also taken when undertaking the methodology for the overarching project. Robson and McCartan illuminate the necessary need for ethical considerations in any kind of research project, especially in those conducted with participants: 'carrying out experiments involving people poses ethical problems in sharp forms' and 'control over what people

do obviously has a moral dimension' (2016, 210). Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that the wellbeing and safeguarding of all participants and their data is accounted for. Robson and McCartan also provide a list of 'ten questionable practices in social research' that should be considered before engaging in participant-based work which were used to manage and inform all ethical considerations.

It should be noted at this point that before any kind of participant involvement was facilitated or even approached, full ethical clearance was sought and obtained by the researcher from Nottingham Trent University's Research Ethics Committee. This was granted after I supplied in-depth documentation that included: a data management plan, participant consent forms, participant debriefing sheets, generalised and individual risk assessments for interviews and observations, and COVID-19 specific risk assessments.

When conducting any kind of social research that involves participants in its studies, the researcher has a vital 'responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of research participants is not adversely affected by the research' (Brewer, 2001, 91). And the utilisation of ethnography arguably places even more importance on this responsibility since the researcher is placing themselves in the communities of these participants for an extended period. Several considerations and actions were taken to ensure the wellbeing of all participants. All participants in interviews and performance observations gave fully 'informed consent' (Brewer, 2001, 92) to the researcher through physical consent forms and verbal interaction, after having the project's intentions, methods and uses for their data communicated in addition to their right to withdraw consent and their data. Every participant was anonymised, and this was also communicated to them. Brewer states that 'where possible, threats to the confidentiality and anonymity of research data should be anticipated by researchers' (2001, 94). Consequently, additionally to communicating a promise of anonymity to participants the researcher also anonymised any information given during the interviews that could lead to someone identifying them upon reading their data, including locations of the participants home, street addresses etc. It should be noted here, that whilst imagery would provide context to many of the participant discussions that are referenced throughout this thesis, the use of such imagery would undermine the steps taken to anonymise and therefore safeguard the privacy of participants. Thus, no photography or imagery of the project's participants are used in this thesis. Whenever notes were taken in performance observations, 'the purpose of the notes' was 'made clear' to the participants (Brewer, 2001, 92). To ensure safety and comfort in the given 'research experience' (Brewer, 2001, 92) all participants were provided with a debriefing sheet alongside verbal communication from the researcher that they are free to not answer a question if they so wished and/or could stop to either take a break or finish the interview at any given time. Whilst

providing the names of performers would have added interest and greater readability to this thesis, due to the nature of some data (where rivalry, competition, and sensitive perceptions are revealed) anonymisation was important as to protect all participants throughout the work.

Regarding data protection, I observed my 'obligations to the Data Protection Act' (Brewer, 2001, 94), and a full data management plan was provided to the researcher's institution as documentation for ethical clearance. This plan, which can also be found in the appendix of this thesis, was adhered to and included the following data-based considerations:

- Access to all data was only accessible to the researcher and their supervisory team.
- All data underlying published results were kept for 12 months to ensure authenticity.
- All participant-based research was safeguarded through anonymisation, secure data storage and full communication of the participants role in the project.
- All data was stored through the lead researcher's Nottingham Trent University's OneDrive Storage Platform alongside a password-encrypted hard drive held by the researcher.

Regarding the safety of both researcher and participants in the current and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a full COVID-19 risk assessment was provided to Nottingham Trent University's Research Ethics Committee. This identified that all interviews would take place online through the Zoom online platform and would be recorded, to omit the risk of virus transmission. Participant observations were only made once government guidelines allowed the visitation of public places such as nightclubs and bars (at which the observations were made).

Considerations were also made for the safety of the researcher. Supervisors were always informed where the researcher was if attending an observation, in addition to having regular contact being maintained through emails, phone calls and supervisory meetings. Additionally, the researcher ensured that they took adequate annual leave times away from the research to maintain their wellbeing.

An intention of this project was to facilitate a reflexive and collaborative process between the researcher and the participants. In working towards this goal across the research process, it became increasingly important to consider the legacy that the project left behind. This is especially since this work is ethnographic in nature and therefore it was at risk of utilising the vulnerabilities that participants shared (particularly through interviews) in ways that were self-fulfilling for the researcher. Several steps were taken to avoid this. Initially, plans for an artistic exhibition were proposed, whereby the full interview datasets would be displayed in public at a local theatre and/or museum.

Unfortunately, much because of COVID-19, these plans were compromised. I then turned to considerations of other forms of research dissemination than that found through this thesis alone. Thus, the work of this chapter, alongside the anonymised voices of the participants that represent its focus, has been (or is in the process of) two other disseminations. Firstly, as previously mentioned, Chapter 7 was re-worked and published in a creative industries journal in 2021. Secondly, a revised version of Chapter 4 is currently in the final stages of peer-review as a chapter in an upcoming edited collection to be published by the University of Delaware Press in the near future. Additionally, whilst not directly utilising the experiences and perceptions shared through this research process, the work has also informed other opportunities that in ways have raised visibility around queer-based issues. Notably, the work in this thesis (particularly in Chapters 4 and 6) informed and facilitated work with National Policing Teams, where I acted as an educational advisor around specific-queer issues particularly around the safety of queer communities in city night-time spaces.

3.7) Conclusions

This chapter has specifically sought to communicate the overall research design of this project through discussions on the paradigms, ontologies, and epistemologies of the work in addition to its preliminary studies, data collection and data analyses methods. It also addressed the methodological limitations of the work and the specific ethical considerations undertaken by the researcher and a reflection of the researcher's role in the project. The methodology proposed here engages with an ethnographic and performance-based approach, as the purpose of this research is to obtain a more developed comprehension of the ways in which drag performance mobilises communities within Nottingham and other medium-sized cities. The methodology is ontologically and epistemologically interpretative, relying on notions of social constructionism to analyse the social phenomena that is drag. These stories matter and whilst, as will be highlighted throughout this thesis, participants at times shared a vulnerability with the researcher (particularly through the discussion of personal and sensitive topics), their physical and mental safety was always safeguarded. Furthermore, their response to the project's data collection processes were overwhelmingly positive, and the project has sought to establish a form of legacy around its city of focus (Nottingham) through both the rapport built between the researcher and the participants but also through further public disseminations of its findings.

Entering Nottingham's drag scene felt like stepping into a vibrant tapestry woven from threads of creativity, resilience, and community spirit. My journey began with a series of participant observations that served as my gateway into this rich cultural landscape. I remember my first night at a local drag show, nestled in a cozy venue pulsating with anticipation. The air was thick with the scent of fake

smoke and hairspray, and a diverse crowd buzzed with excitement. As the lights dimmed and the music started, I felt the energy shift. It was clear that these events were more than just shows; they were communal gatherings where identities were celebrated, and stories shared. Yet – as this thesis will argue, several hindrances to performers were quickly evidenced, threatening the very survival of such events. Thus, my entry into the field illuminated the complexities within the local drag scene, which participant interviews significantly enhanced, deepening my understanding of the multifaceted nature of drag and its role in lesser-metropolitan areas.

My ethnographic journey culminated in a tapestry of narratives, interwoven with my own reflections and interpretations. Each interview and observation added layers to my understanding of Nottingham's drag scene, transforming it from a series of performances into a vibrant community shaped by resilience and creativity. I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the individuals who opened their lives to me. Through participant observations and interviews, the project has not only gathered data but has also forged connections that have and continue to enrich my understanding of the queer community. This journey was about more than research; it was about celebrating the artistry and humanity that thrives within Nottingham's drag scene, a vibrant microcosm of a larger social movement. Yet, as this thesis contends, Nottingham's drag scene and its complex socioeconomic landscape oftentimes places performers in very difficult social and financial situations.

Chapter 4

Queer Nightlife in Lesser-Metropolitan Contexts

'As I make my way through Nottingham's bustling Hockley district, the atmosphere is charged with excitement for an upcoming drag show at a beloved independent bar. The venue is known for its inclusive vibe and creative performances, attracting a diverse crowd eager to celebrate local talent. Patrons chat animatedly outside, sharing their enthusiasm for the lineup while others scroll through social media to catch glimpses of the performers. Inside, the bar is alive with energy. A well-known drag queen, famous for her fierce performances and vibrant personality, is backstage prepping her costume. As the crowd settles in, the lights dim, signalling the start of the show. The first performer takes the stage, delivering an electrifying lip sync that energises the audience. Cheers erupt, and the space feels like a collective celebration of identity. However, the night takes a more somber turn when a fellow performer steps forward to address an incident from a previous show. She recounts how an audience member made derogatory remarks during her act, prompting swift intervention from the venue staff. As she shares her experience, I notice the shift in the audience's demeanor; the excitement gives way to a collective concern. Several attendees express their feelings about the incident, discussing how it affected their enjoyment and sense of safety within the space. One audience member, visibly shaken, shares that such discrimination not only targets performers but also impacts the entire community, creating a ripple effect of discomfort. Another echoes this sentiment, noting how essential it is for venues to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and inclusivity, emphasising that everyone should feel welcome to express themselves without fear of judgment…' (28/09/2022 *Nottingham City Centre).*

Wide-reaching academic debates on the commoditisation and global mainstreaming of queer cultures and the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies into those same cultures, run parallel to conversations on the glorification of transnational drag celebrities. Such stardom, catalysed through the popularisation of drag reality shows, has contributed to an increasing public interest in and demand for drag. Despite a current high demand and popularity for drag, there is a well-documented ongoing threat of closure for many queer-specific venues and safe spaces operating in local UK night-time economies, which *usually* act as breeding grounds for nascent drag performance. This is then synonymous with a de-queering of city night-time economies.

Nottingham, a medium-sized and lesser-metropolitan city situated in the Midlands (UK), evidences this trend of de-queering through a historical and persistent closure of independent queer-specific venues local to its night-time economy over the past two decades. Local government has tended to ignore the issue, showing little to no commitment to rectifying the decline in queer venues despite funding other urban renewal projects for other less-marginalised communities with a view to

stimulating citywide cultural growth and profit.[5] The resulting scarcity of queer venues in the city's local night-time economy provides a gap in the local market. This gap has been opportunistically occupied by heteronormative, corporate, and most importantly non-queer chain venues, who currently find it profitable and convenient to hold often semi-regular LGBTQIA+ oriented evenings for local marginalised communities. Despite a severe lack of queer visibility and spaces of queer safety, Nottingham's night-time economy has maintained a complex and rich drag scene/community that accommodates an abundance of local and non-local performers. The primary aim of this chapter is to critically explore issues of queer visibility in the complex lesser-metropolitan context of Nottingham.

This chapter begins by interrogating this de-queering of lesser-metropolitan night-time economies by detailing the historical erosion of Nottingham's LGBTQIA+ safe spaces and critically analysing the current state and visibility of "queerness" in the city (4.1). This early section of the chapter also addresses the importance of safe spaces for marginalised queer communities, in the context of the historically consistent closure of queer-specific independent venues and the lasting effects this has had on Nottingham's queer community. Arguments herein also critique Nottingham's reconstruction of night-time spaces through urban renewal schemes that contradictorily place importance on economic profit over the wellbeing of marginalised communities, despite the latter being endlessly celebrated and endorsed. The following section (4.2) shifts focus to the complicated nature of queer safe spaces that *do* exist within Nottingham. I posit that the nature of financial opportunism, evidenced through heteronormative establishments' pursuit of profit from local queer economies, financially exploit the very same queer communities they *claim* to support. Later parts of the chapter (4.3) explore the further exploitation of queer communities by assessing the efficacy of Nottingham's alleged queer safe spaces in relation to the physical and mental wellbeing of local LGBTQIA+ communities in the night-time economy. There is also (4.4) further discussion of how drag performers, through their continued public presence in such contexts, add a needed sense of queerness to an otherwise heteronormative environment. Thus, drag is utilised by local performers in efforts to re-queer the city, create safer queer-spaces and work towards the kind of public queer visibility which has eroded. I pose that this re-claiming of the night-time economy shifts the public roles of these individuals from queer performance artists to queer activists. This is followed by a comparative discussion that seeks to explore the nuanced similarities and differences around queer visibility in local night-time economies between lesser-metropolitan and more metropolitan contexts. It does so by comparing Manchester and Nottingham-based participant data (4.5). The chapter then draws these arguments together with a concluding section (4.6).

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[5] These examples of urban renewal will be discussed further in the following section of this chapter (4.1).

Whilst this chapter does not solely seek to analyse the Nottingham drag scene, it utilises the perceptions of drag performers who represent the local queer community in question and its engagement in and around Nottingham's night-time economy. Therefore, interview data from Nottingham-based participants illuminate queer cultural experiences of the city.[6]

4.1) De-Queering of the Lesser-Metropolitan: Nottingham

> Nottingham has 'got an incredibly rich queer culture, but it's never had a home' (Participant 13).

Nottingham is a densely populated medium-sized English city, situated in East Midlands, and has historical associations to the lace and hosiery industries with its Lace Market having been at the centre of the world's lace industry in the early 19th century. It is a city which appears to pride itself on its abundance of queer-visibility and LGBTQIA+ acceptance, fuelled by the 'vibrant' queer histories it holds (Visit Nottinghamshire 2022). This historical vibrancy is of course justified since Nottingham is the birthplace of the UK's 'first officially licensed gay pub' in *The New Foresters* which is claimed to have acted as 'the hub of Nottingham's LGBTQIA+ community ever since' its opening (Turner, 2022). Despite Visit Nottinghamshire's charming descriptions of the LGBTQIA+ diversity and visibility in the city, a closer look at the actual experiences of its queer cultural practitioners leads to a very different view of Nottingham.

The self-proclaimed acceptance of queer visibility shared in Visit Nottinghamshire's statement implies that Nottingham is a city that works to create and perpetuate collective safety for those same queer communities, celebrating the diversity it houses. This statement is however contradicted by the absence of queer safe spaces in the city of Nottingham, making its queer scene feel a lot smaller than that which Visit Nottinghamshire's claims. This is a salient point repeatedly raised by all participants interviewed, when expressing their disappointment with the lack of queer safe spaces within the city: 'we have no LGBTQ+ clubs here anymore' (Participant 2) and there is 'now a limited number of venues that are accessible to us' (Participant 3).

However, this is not a sudden or new development. There has been a slow degradation of Nottingham's queer culture, evidenced by the persistent closure of its queer-oriented spaces over the last three decades. Queer-oriented social venues, usually acting as part of nightlife entertainment, are

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[6] It should be noted that a revision of this chapter is currently in the final stages of peer-review for publication in an upcoming edited collection focused on drag-related research, to be published by the University of Delaware Press.

crucial to the social infrastructure of queer communities. They provide 'safe spaces' which in turn: (i) protect marginalised individuals from the 'harassment, discrimination, threats and violence' which are generated and enforced through the 'cisheteronormativity' that surrounds them, (ii) enable 'safety in self-expression', and (iii) facilitate senses of 'community and belonging' for marginalised queer individuals (Campkin and Marshall 2018, 83-4). Most social venues that stood at the heart of Nottingham's queer community no longer exist. The LGBTQIA+ community's public visibility within the city has also diminished consequentially since these 'spaces, [which are] free from cisheteronormativity' and 'normative assumptions' are now so rare (Campkin and Marshall 2018, 84). *The New Foresters* acts as the single queer-specific venue that exists within Nottingham, but this was not always the case. It might be argued that from the 1980s to pre-COVID years there was a more heightened sense of queer visibility in Nottingham than in our current period, with venues such as *The Pavilion Club*[7], *Gatsby's*[8], *La Chic/Part Two*[9], *L'amour*[10], *Kitsch*[11], *AD2*[12], and *Propaganda*[13] (Barry 2020) all creating tangible spaces of safety for its large queer community. However, since the 1980s and as of more recently (with the closure of *Propaganda* in 2020), all these spaces have closed with no permanent replacement venues within the city's nightlife sector. These closures all indicate a relative demise of queer nightlife within Nottingham and the consequent de-queering of the city and its visible culture, which fails to honour and uphold the rich historical contexts of which the city boasts.

Whilst these closures were not a direct result of queerphobic measures, they were the result of capital transfer caused by the waves of urban renewal and development that Nottingham has encouraged. This is a common trend throughout the history of nightlife within the UK. As Campkin and Marshall note, in recent years (most notably since 2016) queer nightlife venues in London have 'suffered disproportionately in London's wider losses of nightclubs and grassroots music venues' as they succumb 'to commercial residential and infrastructure-led developments' (2018, 82). Here, there a parallel can be drawn to Nottingham's once-loved queer nightclub *Propaganda* which, since its closure

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[7] *The Pavilion Club,* which acted as a gay club adapted from a cricket pavilion in Shardlow and was referred to as the 'handbag club' was closed down in 1983 (Barry, 2020).

[8] *Gatsby's* opened as a gay pub in 1983 on Huntingdon Street, and closed in 2009 (Barry, 2020).

[9] *La Chic/Part Two* was a queer orientated bar on Canal Street, having many famous guests such as 'Eartha Kitt' attend and was closed in 1985 (Barry, 2020).

[10] *L'amour* – A secret queer club with two main floors, where entrance was guarded by a 'drag queen' and a 'blue shutter' situated on St. James Street, with an 'unknown' date of closure (Barry, 2020).

[11] *Kitsch* – A controversial queer-specific club, which opened in 1995 and ran into trouble following reports of 'dealing drugs', again with an unknown date of closure (Barry, 2020).

[12] *AD2* was a queer bar, centred around drag and cross dressing opening in 1980 and closing in 2015 (Barry, 2020).

[13] *Propaganda* was, pre-COVID, Nottingham's only gay club. It closed its doors in 2020 due to testing periods linked to the pandemic.

in 2020, has been converted into offices for a consultancy firm: 'we've had clubs shut down like *Propaganda*, which has now become offices, which is quite upsetting' (Participant 11).

Although *Propaganda's* closure and recent conversion was not carried out by local government, the city seems reluctant to intervene in the re-establishing of queerness in the city. Responsibility for the scarcity of queer-centric safe spaces in the city's local night-time economy then lies with local government's failure to replace them post-closure, since its attention and capital is steered instead towards the promotion of city-wide profit in its high-cost urban renewal projects (which will be explored further in this chapter). Interviews corroborate feelings of uneasiness and sadness around the city's lack of intervention as highlighted by Participant 15: 'I don't think that the city council have done enough to support us. I think the flags and stuff that they hang and are on the streets of Hockley [a central location in Nottingham] tick out boxes'. This and the lack of intervention to replace queer spaces points towards the 'contradictory pulls in neoliberal cities' that Campkin and Marshall address: while the city accepts and celebrates LGBTQIA+ identities through 'commercially sponsored and officially endorsed Pride rallies' such as Nottinghamshire Pride which creates and runs the annual pride weekend, they also fail to support them socially (2018, 82). It is 'global city competitiveness' that affects the city's 'capacity to secure the heritage of queer publics' and it fails to 'keep a foothold in the spaces they have historically occupied' (Campkin and Marshall 2018, 82).

As noted earlier, a single queer-centric space *does* exist in Nottingham: *The New Foresters Pub.* Whilst this venue is claimed by some to be the 'hub of Nottingham's LGBTQ+ community' (Turner, 2022), interview participants shared doubts about its appeal to younger individuals within Nottingham's queer community. Participant 5 and 14 recognise the importance of the venue but infer that it fails to be representative of the entire community: 'we have of course the *New Foresters*, but it needs to be enhanced' (Participant 5) and it is 'something very specific that I love in the queer community […] we must preserve this space' since it 'includes queer people of many different demographics' but 'I do get the thing about it being aged' (Participant 14). This venue then has limited appeal to its community, despite being the only queer space in the city. Firstly, the venue is a self-confessed pub, confining it to a small section of wider nightlife venues in Nottingham: 'it's not a lively venue or kind of club so it wards off a lot of the younger crowd' (Participant 13). This notion of being "aged" and not appealing to younger queer individuals is further inferred by Participant 9 who states that the *New Foresters* is a place only for 'veterans' of the gay community. Desires for the high-energy buzz of a queer nightclub is not replicated there since the *New Foresters* acts more as a convenient and easily accessible venue for all demographics that omits the appeal of a trendy nightclub. This then leaves a further gap in Nottingham's queer nightlife, for a kind of "high-octane" venue that potentially appeals

to "younger" people: 'it's a pub, you don't get the same experience from those venues as what you want' (Participant 15). This is important since the city is home to two large-scale universities[14], encouraging and facilitating the integration of many young people into the city's night-time economy. Therefore, whilst there is a recognised queer space in the *New Foresters*, a void remains in the night-time economy for new "higher-octane" queer spaces in addition to the need for larger number of queer spaces in general (both in nightlife and public areas) in Nottingham. This is especially since those missing spaces could be 'a powerful illustration of the diversity of expressions of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, abilities, socio-economic background and other variables through which people identify' (Campkin and Marshall, 2018, 83).

It feels necessary to precede future discussions within this thesis, which is centred around concepts of queer safety, by interrogating the definition, construction, and efficacy of queer safe spaces in lesser-metropolitan urban settings. Goh explains how for its citizens, the city and the 'urban life' it facilitates presents 'normative ideal[s] in the potential of difference without exclusion' and become 'places of relative safety for those confronting institutionalised violence' (Goh, 2018, 464). Yet as this thesis will further articulate cities are not always safe, particularly for queer communities, since they often become sites of 'disinvestment', 'marginalisation', 'inequality', and spaces of 'social contestation' that elicits threats of discriminatory violence towards those communities (Goh, 2018, 464). It is widely accepted that city spaces, in relation to geographies of sexuality, are actively and heterosexually produced and their 'function of diverse overt and covert mechanisms of spatial control indicates [an] ongoing suppression of non-normative sexualities' that governs LGBTQIA+ embodiments in such spaces (Hartal, 2018, 1055). The creation of queer safe space in the city then becomes necessary. For Hartal, the construction and proliferation of LGBTQIA+ specific safe spaces play 'a major role in constructing LGBT space' within city landscapes since the purpose for their creation 'is enmeshed in the liberal logics that underlie identity politics' (2018, 1068).

For the city's marginalised queer communities, the physical presence of queer-centric spaces disrupts the heteronormative production of city spaces and offers them the promise of queer 'fortification', 'anonymity', 'inclusivity', 'separation' for identity groups, and the 'control' of 'unpredictable influences' such as surrounding threats of patriarchal violence (Hartal, 2018). Importantly these spaces interrupt the heteronormative domination of city geographies. This is since they facilitate the development of 'unique culture[s] by socialising individuals in the community and providing them with unique services' which can potentially lead to the development of what Pascar et al define as 'gayborhoods' (Pascar et al, 2022, 4). 'Gayborhood' refers to a form of queer gentrification whereby

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[14] Nottingham is home to both The University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University.

local queer communities populate areas of the city, establishing further queer presence and visibility that works towards diminishing the geographical imbalance between heteronormativity and queer space in city landscapes. Whilst the conception of gayborhoods in city contexts relies on more complex factors than sole access to queer safe spaces in the city's night-time entertainment industry, they do speak towards similar goals. The development of both queer urbanised districts *and* city-based safe spaces provides the possibility for queer communities 'to more easily access courtship', 'provide a perception of safer streets', 'offer access to queer businesses and institutions', 'enable social movement organising, and […] [act as] conduits of community building' (Ghaziani, 2021, 107). Participant 1 reflects on the social mobilisation that began to construct city-based gayborhoods in Nottingham decades ago: 'I remember when there were several towers of flats in and around the city centre that housed queer communities here and we all looked after each other […] we even called them the queer towers'. Whilst this process can inevitably be problematised, especially with relevance to the concept of gayborhoods and its links to the forms of queer-mainstreaming and heightened queer consumerism that gentrification elicits, it establishes clear queer visibility across the city landscape. Queer safe spaces in the local night-time economy, by pursuing similar aims to the social mobilisation of gayborhoods, permit 'urban sexualities [to] acquire their significance on the streets' of the lesser-metropolitan city (Ghaziani, 2021, 91). This effect is more important to Nottingham now than before, given that gayborhoods like Nottingham's 'queer towers' have been demolished alongside the erosion of the city's complex queer nightlife scene. The severe lack of queer-centric space in Nottingham contributes to the city's geographical imbalance and heteronormative dominance in its night-time economy. The 'gayborhoods' that Nottingham once contained and its abundance of independent queer venues have both eroded, and with that, the promise that they hold for local queer communities has also dissolved. It is through these socially erosive procedures that Nottingham experiences a 'deterritorialisation of social ties', where for local queer communities its city geography 'loses importance as a space of sociability' (Link et al., 2022, 965). This renders the space as 'less significant' for *those* inhabitants (Link et al., 2022, 965).

Although the promise of queer safe spaces can be beneficial for local queer communities in lesser-metropolitan areas, they are problematic and paradoxical in nature. As the Roestone Collective illustrate, the cultivation of safe space includes 'foregrounding social differences and binaries (safe–unsafe, inclusive–exclusive) as well as recognizing the porosity of such binaries' (2014, 1346). This illustrates how the safety established through these spaces is inevitably limited. Through the 'reinstitution of regulatory forces' that supports 'heteronormative order', safe space discourse operates under the normalising gaze of the 'middle class' and usually 'white' and 'masculinist' subject (Fox and Ore, 2010, 631). This renders queer subjectivity in an overly 'simplistic and reductive manner'

which produces an 'illusionary safety' (Fox and Ore, 2010, 631) for local communities. Therefore, queer safe spaces in cites can never be *completely* safe. Queer safe space, including those existing in local night-time economies such as Nottingham's, seem to reproduce 'tendencies toward inclusion and exclusion within different power structures and spaces' (Pascar et al, 2022, 4). Queer-centric bars in lesser-metropolitan regions become 'negotiated spatial constructions' that reveal the 'emotional politics' of its users which are 'contradictory and contested' (Pascar et al, 2022, 8). Since understandings of safety inevitably 'varies for different identity groups and changes over time and between places', the varying discourse that exists within such venues can lead to 'diverse situations of exclusion or marginalisation' (Pascar et al, 2022, 9) within the communities they intend to protect. In this way, the safety discourses that queer safe spaces employ risk lining up 'neatly […] with the neoliberal logics of individualised risk, but also with broader state security agendas that define for us who is considered worth protecting and who is not' (Luhmann, 2016, 74).

The issue of safety in urban settings 'has a long history within LGBTQ contexts' and whilst the concept of queer safe spaces may exist as a problematic and illusory 'dream' in wider academic discourse, for lesser-metropolitan areas they stand as reminders that local marginalised groups exist and thrive within the city (Luhmann, 2016, 72-7). Participant 15 identifies the importance they place on such spaces within the night-time economy: 'how can a city with such a big community of queer people have nowhere that represents them, that says we are here […] we have been left with nowhere to go and nowhere to help build that community […] we have been left to rot'. For Participant 15 the complex politics of queer space that are central to academic discussion, are clearly irrelevant. Whilst surely affecting them in a perhaps subconscious way, the performer clearly feels the need for spaces that make them feel *'safe'* in a city that does not. Participant 1 corroborates these feelings: 'I would definitely feel safer if there were more places for us […] Nottingham doesn't feel safe a lot of the time and having somewhere to feel good and be ourselves is important'. Queer safe spaces like those which have illuminated Nottingham's queer history, 'provide refuge for activism, social and personal transformation, facilitation thereof for productive spaces of dialogue, and identity construction' for its marginalised communities (Pascar et al, 2022, 1). Conversely to the city's production of heteronormative space queer safe spaces oppose 'the modes and institutions of urban development and spatial marginalisation', establishing alternate social-spatial relations and providing 'the possibility of continued difference in the city' (Goh, 2018, 474). Local queer communities remain unsupported by the city, and their feelings of physical and mental safety negated.

Conceptually, a city that embodies neoliberal urbanism seeks to restructure 'urban space where the city is mobilised as a site for capital accumulation' (Campkin, 2020, 94). Nottingham actively restructures city space, through the historic elimination of queer spaces in favour of more profitable

public space/business, that speaks directly towards this urbanism. The city council not only has failed to replace lost queer venues, but it has permitted the conversion of such spaces into more profitable business vessels. This is indicated by Nottingham's transformation of *Propaganda* into city-based office spaces (as referenced earlier) which can be viewed in the context of neoliberalism and notions of urban renewal, which the city further partakes in. Nottingham's recent high-cost regeneration projects include (i) new home developments as part of the 'Waterside' regeneration, (ii) the conversion of 'Guildhall Place' (an old central building) into a grand hotel, and (iii) the planned work in 'Broadmarsh' with the intention of creating new public spaces in the form of coffee shops alongside new car parks and bus stations within the city centre (Nottingham City Council, 2022, A). It is evident how the city's work begins to enter fields of gentrification that is indirectly endorsed by the council in their attempt to redevelop the city through its cultural sector whereas any real attempt to reinvigorate and support the queer scene it likes to publicly endorse is omitted. These projects align with urban renewal economics to potentially 'improve physical, social and economic gain within a specified area' (Mehdipanah, et al., 2018, 243). However, they focus on areas that do not assist the queer community specifically and therefore dismisses the importance of city-wide social diversity and instead drives the economic profit of the city (Mehdipanah, et al., 2018, 243). Through these urban renewal schemes Nottingham situates itself as a modern city that, whilst evidently not de-regulated, embraces forms of laissez-faire practices that work to embolden and beckons new profitable businesses (for example in its reconstruction of city space in the 'Broadmarsh' location). An investment into the city's marginalised queer communities, by funding public LGBTQIA+ safe spaces, would not perhaps establish the same financial promise for the city as business that more directly appeals to larger markets. This focus on the regeneration of city public space serves as an example of how the 'neoliberal city is an inherently unequal class project that allows the privileged elites to structure space according to their economic and political interests at the expense of marginalised […] classes' (Campkin, 2020, 92). Thus, the city has radically been de-queered and there are little to no signs of intervention by the local council.

These efforts resemble 'how neoliberal cities prioritise cleaning public spaces, overlooking abusive situations in private settings' (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2023, 8). Nottingham becomes involved in mobilising economic space for capitalist financial growth and commodification which in this case prioritises the 'creative destruction of urban built environments' that serve those that are marginalised through the erosion of its queer independent venues (Theodore et al., 2011, 21). Modern cities have become 'increasingly central to the reproduction, transmutation, and continual reconstitution of neoliberalism' and as such they have become 'strategic targets and proving grounds for an increasingly broad range of neoliberal policy experiments, institutional innovations, and political projects'

(Theodore et al., 2011, 24). It is these influences that drive the efforts of the local council in their prioritisation of expanding citywide profit through high-cost urban renewal schemes, that do not directly benefit its local queer communities, despite the absence of queer visibility in the city.

4.2) Renegotiating Queer Space and the Financial Exploitation of Queer Communities

Whilst Nottingham's cultural history has evidenced continual closures of queer spaces, the wide marketability and need for these spaces has not gone unnoticed, by both the local queer community and local non-queer-specific nightlife venues. In their opportunistic creation of irregular LGBTQIA+ events whereby their venue becomes temporarily *queer*, these venues, I argue, contradictorily support *and* exploit that community and its needs. This section interrogates the efficacy and motivations of these allegedly queer-centric venues in Nottingham's night-time economy problematising their attempts to re-queer the city with regards to their *temporary* efforts to enact "queerness" with profit-centric intentions.

The night-time economy, or the 'booze-economy' refers to a wide proportion of night-time economic activity with specific connotations of 'entertainment and retail provisions of cities at night' such as bars and nightclubs (Shaw, 2010, 2). It is in this industry and night-time economy that queer venues, and the associated visibility they ensure, thrive within urban spaces. Yet, there is a scarcity of these venues in Nottingham's local night-time market. This has established a wide gap in Nottingham's night-time economy which has been infiltrated and temporarily occupied by a cluster of non-queer-specific night-time venues who hold regular queer nights and events to capitalise on this market gap, such as *Revolución de Cuba*[15]*, Rough Trade*[16]*, Lord Roberts*[17]*,* and *PopWorld*[18]. These are the only venues within the city that facilitate forms of queer-inclusive spaces for its respective communities and, crucially to this project, drag performance. It should be noted that most of these venues are part of a larger, branded chains, led and funded by overhead umbrella corporations (with the only exception being the Lord Roberts pub). Therefore, independent night-time venues in Nottingham are vastly outnumbered by larger chain venues which occupy most of Nottingham's night-time economy.

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[15] *Revolución de Cuba*, is a large chain of bars across the UK, with the Nottingham branch being located in the city centre on Market Street.
[16] *Rough Trade* is an independent record store, also known for acting as an event place for live music, drinking and show events. Despite being "independent" it has a worldwide presence with multiple locations including Nottingham's Broad Street store.
[17] *The Lord Roberts* is a local independent pub on Broad Street in Nottingham.
[18] *PopWorld,* a leading chain of nightclubs/bars in the UK and owned by TDR Capital, is located in the centre of Nottingham's Market Square.

This economy then 'constitutes a ductile yet structured and structuring meshwork of difference and unequal power relations' (Brantz et al, 2014, 18) not only between corporate dominance over independent venues, but also of heteronormatively produced/owned space and queer space.

This transition within Nottingham's night-time economy from queer-orientated spaces to ones that are solely profit-driven, echoes earlier discussions on Nottingham's identifiable preference for heteronormative business space over spaces that establish collective queer safety. Nottingham further entrenches itself in this process through the dominance of heteronormative venues in local markets, which have overtaken the missing queer presence within Nottingham's nightlife industry. They have done so by holding weekly or monthly events in particular areas of their night-time venues, which attempt to establish *temporary* safe space for queer communities. These include: *Revolución de Cuba's* top floor, *Rough Trade's* performance area, and *PopWorld* which differs by offering its entire dancefloor and bar to the single evening. This reinvention of Nottingham's queer spaces is one that directly benefits heteronormative night-time venue companies. Given the irregularity of such events, the efficacy of such spaces in producing many of the positive social consequences of queer safe space in the local night-time economy (that were discussed earlier) are subdued. Heteronormative institutions here reflect an ongoing neoliberal deconstruction and 'attempted reconstitution of urban social space' (Brenner and Theodore, 2005, 101) where 'nightlife spaces are constantly being reinvented and remodelled' (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002, 99) for increased profit. This temporary queering reflects the contradictory nature of capitalist businesses operating in modern cities in neoliberal times. They support queer communities through official endorsement, exemplified through irregular and allegedly LGBTQIA+ specific events which are marketed as safe spaces, but limit the effectiveness of this vital infrastructure by only allowing one night in seven days of operation (at most) to be allocated to them.

Company motivations are presumably more focused upon overall profit and popularity due to 'city competitiveness' across the night-time economy (Campkin and Marshall, 2018, 82) than the effectiveness of their impact on queer individuals/communities. It should be noted that lesser-metropolitan cities, like Nottingham, have their own independent and complex neoliberal economies where competition, autonomy and the profit-centricity overtake the needs of the marginalised. Through their infiltration of and dominance over local queer nightlife *and* by establishing an active presence in more common nightlife forms within the city, businesses cement their position in local economic hierarchies. This is intrinsic to their financial success in this local economy, since competition exerts 'greater power' in neoliberal cities (Shaw, 2015, 457). Whilst the degradation of Nottingham's queer-specific venues suggests their unprofitability, the operation of queer nightlife spaces hold the

potential to be majorly profitable as 'gay scenes' still have a 'commercial focus' (Campkin and Marshall, 2018, 84-85).

The intent to profit from queerness and the local community who construct it echoes discussions of the 'pink pound' which describes the high 'purchasing power of the LGBT community', worth around '£6 billion per year in the UK' and 'viewed as a substantial asset to the UK economy' (West, 2020). Whilst we see a trend of national and local queer bar closures, the concept of the pink pound reiterates that profit can and is made from the LGBTQIA+ community that includes night-time economies. For heteronormative companies like those that work to renegotiate queer spatial structures in Nottingham's local nightlife sector, Nottingham presents a profitable opportunity and market-gap for queer events: 'one certainty in the business world is that if there's money to be made, companies will jump in with both feet' (West, 2020). Therefore, the organisers involved in creating these events seek to profit from both the queer audiences it openly *attempts* to temporarily welcome, but also audiences who do not necessarily identify as LGBTQIA+. Through their intervention into a local queer nightlife economy that has eroded and has been met with urban renewal schemes that refuse to aid it, hegemonic companies once again shape subjectivities in the neoliberal night-time economy in their attempts to 'encourage new ways of using the city' (Shaw, 2015, 26).

The limitations and profit-centric motivations of these events are exacerbated, not just through their infrequency, but through their inaccessibility. Participant 1 shared how they were interviewed by *PopWorld's* owner, 'a straight man' who wanted to hold an 'LGBT night once a month' since he held a 'similar night [which] had worked where he originally came from' and 'wanted a Sunday LGBT night that was pure cheese' (Participant 1). This testimony raises two interesting points. Firstly, by replicating a focused LGBTQIA+ event which has 'worked' before indicates a sense of profitability for both the venue and the venue manager, especially when capitalising on the demand that Nottingham's erosion of queer space has elicited. Secondly, the management of *PopWorld* highlighted their preference for Sundays, an inaccessible *and* usually unprofitable day for nightlife. This is because these events are often associated with the consumption/over-consumption of alcohol and unsociable hours, and many eventgoers will return to their occupations on the following day. Participant 1 considers the issues with holding the event on a Sunday and reportedly told the manager to consider taking over 'a Saturday night because it would be more popular' which was of no intertest because it would 'make Sunday nights more profitable' (Participant 1). This acknowledgement of the event's inaccessible timeslot implies that the intentions that motivate it are not in the interest of the queer community. Instead, institutions recognise the communities' growing need for spaces of safety in the local night-time economy and capitalise upon this demand by adding profit to their less successful days of operation. Since there is so little competition in the city's queer-specific nightlife market, these

events are then made appealing to local minoritised communities despite the use of relatively unattractive days. Participant 14 raises the issues around accessibility here more directly saying that a 'Sunday night' prevents them from enjoying and entering these kinds of queer spaces because they have 'a full-time job' which might be impacted by their attendance, but ultimately it is 'all [they] have'. Other notable corroborations of these arguments are: queer spaces 'don't exist in Nottingham anymore' and 'places like *Revolución de Cuba* and *PopWorld* have jumped onto that to make money' (Participant 13), and 'they're just doing it because they can get extra money from the upstairs area which isn't usually used and make them more popular' (Participant 6). Awareness around the financial exploitation of the local queer community permeates these discussions, illuminating the exploitative nature of heteronormative intervention into queer nightlife scenes in Nottingham in their pursuit of profit from the local pink economy. Regardless of the low frequency of these events (monthly or sometimes weekly), their consistent presence in events schedules infers their financial success. This financial success which is most likely through the higher percentages of drink and ticket sales than non-LGBTQIA+ (Sunday) nights.

A further profit-driven method employed by these institutions is the utilisation of drag performance at their events. Alongside the potential for an increase in profit margins, the utilisation of drag by these event venues works towards establishing an essential part of an LGBTQ+ space: overt queerness. This is of relevance in this case since event spaces which are not queer-centric seek to profit from queer communities and therefore must appeal to those audiences. It seems that drag performance is the unifying component of queer evenings in Nottingham, establishing forms of queerness that such spaces do not intrinsically have. Every monthly/weekly event labelled 'queer' in the city, by non-LGBTQIA+ establishments, is advertised with at least one (usually more) drag performer being included as a form of live entertainment. This catalyses a temporary transition from heteronormatively produced spaces to venues that work 'toward an indefinable queer space' through the inclusion of drag (Berbary and Johnson, 2017, 310). Heteronormative event spaces rely on drag to establish a palatable form of queerness that creates a sense of appeal to queer audiences. Since drag is now such a mainstream commodity (which will be expanded upon much further in the following chapter) it also entices non-queer audiences who will therefore frequent these events. Once again this propels the sales of tickets, drinks and subsequently profit. Participant 11 details the exploitative use of drag to "queer up" heteronormative venues: 'a lot of places in Nottingham want to get involved in drag because it is currently so mainstream for queer people *and* others […] it's an instant economic benefit for them'. Through this dependence on drag at events that are labelled queer, local venues exploit the local queer communities' lack of mobility through a rarity of nightlife venues whilst also

profiting from the mainstreaming and raised global consumption of drag by *other* non-queer audiences.

Drag has a huge appeal which is arguably the result of several very different factors, one of which I believe to be the geographical positioning of Nottingham and the city's resources[19]. This popularity heightens businesses' potential high profit margins, and therefore justifies the competitive motivations of local non-queer bars to create temporary queer spaces. This is since the area has a wide market for such spaces which can facilitate drag more easily and organically.

Nottingham's queer community is a prominent one, since around '80,000 people' identify as 'LGBT+' (NHS Nottinghamshire, 2022] in the city and its catchment area. Nottingham itself is geographically surrounded by much smaller cities, towns and villages who seemingly have less prominent queer scenes such as Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Loughborough, etc. Nottingham therefore presents itself as a point of queer convergence for not only its own community, but for those that surround it. Participant 6 mentions how Nottingham is 'very accessible in terms of buses and trains for smaller towns and cities'. Nottingham, as mentioned earlier, also houses the GIC[20] in its city centre and as Participant 6 points out: 'having that gender clinic here means that being closer to it is a big advantage' for queer communities seeking help and the participant knows several people who moved 'here to be nearer to that'. Also contributing to the queer frequentation of Nottingham's queer scene is the city's two universities which bring a new influx of (usually younger) students, a proportion of which are likely to engage with the scene: Nottingham has 'got two universities which obviously brings in a lot of different people to the scene here' (Participant 4). These two factors, alongside Nottingham's geographical positioning as a medium-sized and easily accessible city, work in tandem to catalyse Nottingham as a site for queer convergence. Thus, this site provides the night-time economy with great interest in adapting to the needs, requirements, and preferences of these communities by employing drag performers to queer up these events.

> You always find that there is a high population of LGBTQ + people in Nottingham, in one area. And that is because people travel from surrounding areas to go to Nottingham for the local queer scene like Lincoln, Loughborough, and places like that. And people used to talk about Nottingham all the time in Lincoln and other areas drag-wise. Also, Nottingham used to be a popular place to go to for the nightlife again because it has so many smaller places around it. So it draws a high amount of people there, and specifically for the drag and queer events. (Participant 8).

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[19] Some of which this thesis seeks to investigate such as general shifts in audience types, mainstreaming of drag/queer culture, and shifts in the drag industry, etc)
[20] GIC: The Nottingham Centre for Transgender Health

I will now expand upon the financial influence this emergence of temporary queer spaces has within the city's local economy and the hierarchies of their market positioning. The decline of queer nightlife, evidenced by high rates of closures in Nottingham, is very much a global issue/trend. Whilst this kind of nightlife presents 'a sense of belonging' for queer individuals, globally there is an 'ongoing loss of LGBTQ[IA]+ venues' and consequently queer nightlife faces 'an uncertain future' (de Lise, 2022). This threat to the existence of these venues is heightened when we consider the independency of certain venues who do not have the kind of financial safety nets and backing that corporate chain venues do, especially since 'they are up against the forces of urbanisation and the ever-deeper financialisation of urban centres' (Campkin and Marshall, 2018, 82).

Although notions of the pink pound suggest that high profitability can be gained through queer communities, and despite the large queer population of Nottingham, queer nightlife still targets only a small proportion of wider nightlife markets. This could very well be a leading factor in their demise. The dominance of the corporate/chain venue population in Nottingham's queer night-time economy far outweighs those of independent venues, and this could potentially heighten the threat of closure for these independent bars/clubs further. More financial backing may infer that the chain/corporate venues can better fund the promotion and marketing of their events, and have greater financial stability due to funding from parent companies than their independent counterparts such as the *New Foresters* Pub. This may also allude to why the independent queer-specific venues that proliferated in Nottingham from the 1980s to 2020 failed to financially compete with the city's nightlife. Through these examples, considering the influence of neoliberal competitiveness in lesser-metropolitan cities, it highlights how 'multinational or nationwide chains have been able to proliferate over smaller or locally based independent bars' (Shaw, 2015, 457) through the maintenance and increasing of pre-existing financial capital.

In addition to shifting profit from queer independent venues such as those mentioned, the saturation of Nottingham's already small queer nightlife sector also places independent queer-event promoters and organisers (specifically in relation to drag events) in more precarious financial positions. This is most notably discussed by Participant 1 who is not only a full-time drag performer but also an independent full-time drag event organiser/promoter working and operating primarily within Nottingham. This participant reflected much on their booking and organising of ticketed drag events with '*Ru-Girls'* as the lead act in Nottingham sharing that this profit comprised a huge part of their 'business', acting as their 'bread and butter' financially. They then disclosed that in the 'coming year' they were no longer able to book 'as many *Ru-Girls'* since 'the big boys have come in' to take over that role. When questioned on the use of the term 'big boys' the participant referred to institutions such as *'PopWorld'* and claimed that they could not compete with these companies since they could 'offer

way more to the performers' than the participant could (Participant 1). Thus, there is an unequal distribution of financial profit amongst queer independent promoters and event organisers who also operate within Nottingham's night-time economy, with corporations once again dominating financially. Since this is also a huge part of the participants' livelihoods, the competition enforced through the infiltration of queer nightlife by these businesses directly - and negatively- affects queer individuals working to create diverse and queer-focused events within the city. These businesses within the neoliberal city create a financial hierarchy within Nottingham's already scarce queer night-time economy, where chain and umbrella company-led venues lead and overlook independent businesses where 'market and corporate power' is promoted (Shaw, 2010, 11).

This corporate market dominance held by companies that claim to provide marginalised communities with much needed safe spaces, also works to exploit that same community. The treatment of drag performers who are employed by these businesses to "queer up" their venues confirms this. The most significant example of this exploitation is the low and unregulated pay rates amongst performers. Eleven of the fifteen participants all shared their discontentment with the heteronormative venues regarding fair pay. Typical comments were: 'gigs in Nottingham don't pay that much' **(**Participant 2), 'you don't get paid enough' (Participant 5) and 'it's a joke how much queens get paid in Nottingham' (Participant 7). There were also issues over payment. Participant 10 who stated that after messaging a venue 'more than a few times' that they were still 'waiting' for payment from a previous performance at a venue. Participant 1 states that the 'larger companies' in question 'want to pay you hourly' for drag work or even offer to 'pay you in experience' with no monetary pay. And finally Participant 15 shared that they were offered to be paid in a '£70 bar tab' for drinks whilst they attended and performed at an event with no monetary payment.

These are examples of occupational mistreatment regarding rights to equal pay in legal and moral perspectives, but the contradiction between the venues' alleged "aiding" of and direct mistreatment of local queer communities here is also problematic. The discussions above address wider debates within the entertainment and more specifically live-performance industries. Within the 'performing arts hierarchy' performers often expect to be 'underpaid and undervalued' and can be expected to perform with 'no [physical] payment' (Stewart, 2022, 31). Several participant interviews work to corroborate these claims. Whilst this will be investigated in more detail in the following chapter it is useful to address the pay rates of performers when critiquing local heteronormative bars engaging in queer nightlife.

4.3) Local Issues Around Queer Safety

This section interrogates how heteronormative companies in Nottingham's local night-time economy further exploit local queer communities, by assessing the efficacy of those alleged queer safe spaces with specific relation to the physical and mental wellbeing of those communities.

The efforts of UK-based queer activists in obtaining LGBTQIA+ rights have been highly successful. Rising national LGBTQIA+ visibility has been signified through the obtaining of institutional rights such as gay marriage, and whilst this provides a sharp contrast between the historical severity of the treatment of queer individuals/communities and their marginalisation, 'the fight against equality and freedom for LGBT people appears to be regaining strength' (Goh, 2018, 464). Yet, these efforts are dampened by the common 'prominent acts of violence' which have 'continued unabated' against marginalised queer communities, that are known to 'play out in gay centres and in urban areas' (Goh, 2018, 463) like Nottingham.

The vitality of nightlife can exacerbate these instances and increase the threat of discrimination and subsequent violence (mental or physical) faced by its queer communities: 'One in six LGBT people (17 per cent) who visited a café, restaurant, bar or nightclub in the last 12 months have been discriminated against based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity' (Stonewall, 2022). This is more than likely due to the intrinsic link between nightlife and the consumption/over-consumption of alcohol. Eleven of the fifteen participants shared their experiences of threat in Nottingham's night-time economy due to public reception of their queerness. Examples of this are: 'there is always some intimidation in the air In Nottingham in drag or even just being openly queer actually' (Participant 7); participants don't feel comfortable holding hands with their partner for the fears of someone not 'accepting it' (Participant 15); several of the participants directly refer to 'first-hand' instances in which they were subject to 'abuse' (Participant 12) and direct 'homophobia and transphobia' (Participant 11) in the city.

It feels important to also recall a study by DiverCity in which Nottingham was found to be 'an LGBT friendly city' where only '29%' of respondents considered 'discrimination against LGBT people […] was a major social problem' and that 'LGBT [people] feel mostly comfortable in the city centre' (Nottingham City Council, 2017, B). This study appears to be a point of pride for the council, even endorsed by Visit Nottinghamshire when they share that Nottingham 'has a great LGBTQIA+ […] scene ready to explore' (Visit Nottinghamshire, 2022). Yet the participant interviews referred to throughout this chapter have evidenced that these perceptions are not wholly representative of Nottingham's queer community and the kinds of discrimination and safety-issues they face and must negotiate within the city and its night-time economy.

Participants reported feeling 'outnumbered' by non-queer individuals in the city (Participant 4) and stated directly that 'Nottingham's city centre isn't particularly gay-friendly, and I don't feel very safe there at all' (Participant 8). Participant 1 recalled how their queer housemates and themselves decided to 'not get ready' for drag 'at home' and instead 'book hotels' for fear of the 'neighbours knowing' of their occupation. Participant 4 felt like they could only 'go out in drag with other drag queens' because that is the only thing that provides them with a 'safety blanket' in Nottingham, whilst Participants 2 and 14 vividly described how they would hide their drag through wearing 'tracksuit bottoms' and a 'big coat' when travelling to venues (Participant 2) or 'always have makeup wipes' in case they feel threatened enough that they have to remove their makeup (Participant 14). These experiences of local drag performers suggests that the threat of heteronormative and patriarchal violence is heightened in their city, reiterating the importance of queer diversity and visibility to decrease risk and work towards collective safety.

Further exposing Nottingham's queer communities to the threat of such discriminatory violence is the lack of responsibility and duty of care, partially highlighted by their temporary enacting of queerness, that heteronormative venues (largely discussed earlier) evidence for that community. A Participant, who is a long-time working drag performer for *Revolución de Cuba,* vividly describes an experience of discriminatory aggression they experienced when hosting an event in this bar:

> At my event last month, a club night, I had to kick someone out because they were just being vile really [...] So they walked in and they were wasted. They were being really obnoxious. He walked up to me and literally stuck his middle finger right in my face. So, I got on the microphone, and I was like, "what's the problem?". And then he started like just giving me a lip and shouting queer slurs, so I told him to get the fuck out. Security finally came and escorted him out. The event is ticketed but once the show finishes, we kind of just open it up to everyone, if that makes sense. And it was one of the people that came up that was causing trouble (Participant 2).

This experience within *Revolución de Cuba* is a pertinent example of how the opportunistic mentality of these heteronormative bars is regarded above the needs and safety of the demographic it invites. Firstly, the participant describes how the event is 'ticketed,' yet once the main event has finished the queer space is then opened to other non-queer audiences to increase profit margins. It should be noted here that this queer event space is found upstairs, and to access it performers and attendees must traverse the non-queer bar downstairs. This increases the potential for heteronormative threat, which is particularly significant given that several participants already want to hide their queerness for fear of drawing discriminatory attention as some participants feel threatened 'in the straight bars' within Nottingham (Participant 10). What is ultimately endangering though is the volatility of this space and the breaking of any queer-centric illusion which the venue has attempted to create when it

allows non-queer individuals to enter. This is not to argue for queer-gatekeeping and is 'not saying that straights shouldn't be allowed in' (Participant 1) to such venues. Rather, the issue is the prioritisation of financial gain through increased drink sales, over establishing effective queer safe spaces. Through the active dismantling of separation between heteronormative and queer communities that is intrinsic to the success of queer safe spaces (Hartal, 2018), the venue invites collision and therefore severely heightens the threat of violence against marginalised individuals.

Participants 1, 5, and 8 corroborate the existence of this kind of exploitation: 'when the straights outweigh the gays in the event then it's not an LGBT event' (Participant 1); these bars don't feel 'like an accepting space' (Participant 5); and they 'don't feel very safe [in Nottingham] at all anyway, let alone being in a straight bar that is calling itself queer for the night' (Participant 8). Since Nottingham fails to establish queer visibility through its scarcity of queer-centric locations, the unsafeness of the exploitative spaces that *do* exist is even more severe. The geographical positioning of these spaces should also be addressed. These bars, that create periodic LGBTQIA+ events, are surrounded by non-queer spaces/nightlife venues in a very busy city centre. This therefore has the potential to create further issues of safety for attendees, who become further intimidated or threatened. Whilst this is not an issue for which these venues are wholly responsible, it should be considered when discussing queer safety in Nottingham since it underscores the need for queer safe spaces that renegotiate the city's queer spatial structures.

Queer safety for associated communities does not simply regard 'physical safety but [the] psychological, social, and emotional safety' of queer individuals and 'queer safe spaces play a major role in constructing LGBT space' (Hartal, 2018, 1054). The criteria for these frames have not been wholly or successfully met by the bars holding queer events in Nottingham. Firstly, the fortification (Hartal, 2018) of queer spaces is limited regarding the discussed venues in their temporary queering and selective inaccessibility since the venues fail to hold a queer safe space open for longer than the given once-a-month or once-a-week slots. (i) Preserving anonymity, (ii) creating inclusive space, and (iii) creating a space of separation for marginalised identity groups, are all intrinsic frames of queer spaces which are undermined by the act of welcoming non-queer attendees into the venue once queer communities have already been profited from and are no longer the main concern (Hartal, 2018). Conclusively, in reference to the work of Gilly Hartal (2018) on framing effective queer spaces, it remains feasible that these spaces may struggle to be perceived as queer safe spaces at all.

4.4) Reclaiming Queer Space: Drag Performers as Queer Activists

> I think that the queens and the people are attempting to rebuild a community that, to put it bluntly, died here. The gay community itself died for a long time. And the queens that are working in Nottingham now are trying really hard to rebuild something that was lost so long ago (Participant 15).

Whilst the event spaces referenced earlier with their illusory promises of queer safety, are easily problematised drag performance thrives in Nottingham. Seeking to increase their profit margins by showcasing of drag, these bars *do* work towards establishing room for overt queerness in the city of Nottingham. So, whilst this chapter has been largely critical of the operation of Nottingham's nightlife and the occurrence of heteronormative invasion of queer spaces, we should remember that these attempts to re-queer the city have been vital for the city and its non-heteronormative community, regardless of its intrinsic limitations.

There are several instances described by participants where these bars succeed in providing queer-centric safe spaces for the local communities: 'some places really aren't very welcoming in Nottingham and some places really are. Like *Revolución de Cuba* provides a safe space mostly, and I think that *PopWorld* is working very hard to provide a safe space' (Participant 4). Most notably, participants seem to associate a sense of safe space and the re-queering of the city with the presence and actions of drag performers in those spaces, not necessarily with the operation of corporate bars housing those performances: 'I think that in Nottingham, and there's some particular queens doing an amazing job of not taking over bars, but creating nights or special events where those bars open up to the LGBT and allow them the safe space they should have in the city but don't' (Participant 12). Drag performers here seem to raise the visibility of queerness in Nottingham. Drag itself is known to be a liberating force within the queer community: 'Liberation is a word that is often used to describe the feeling people experience when they are in drag' but also for those who engage with it (Baetens 2019, 168). And this liberation comes from the idea of drag's subversive nature and exaggerated queerness since 'drag is different in the way that it actively claims visibility and agency, making it extremely vulnerable and powerful at the same time' (Baetens 2019, 181). It is this claiming of queer visibility that participants support, especially due to the ways that this local visibility and community have been eroded over the last few decades.

It should be noted that Nottingham's overarching lack of queer safe spaces diminishes opportunities for performers to both enact/share their artistry and find suitable employment. All fifteen participants interviewed noted difficulties finding opportunities in Nottingham, despite most stating that drag was incredibly popular in the city. This was largely considered to be the result of how few queer safe spaces

existed in the city, which would naturally facilitate their work. When asked what was stopping them from becoming a full-time drag performer and leaving their main occupation, Participant 2 said it is because of 'the complete lack of opportunity here in Nottingham' because 'we have no LGBTQ+ clubs here anymore'. Not only does the lack of queer spaces create issues of visibility, but it also directly affects the employment status of performers working within the city in addition to the employment of local bar staff etc.[21]

The place of drag in Nottingham appears to be vital in its attempted re-queering, and since these bars are the only locations in the city taking over this work, their contribution should be acknowledged. However, I wish to consider these as attempts to re-queer Nottingham's night-time economy rather than regard it as a success. This is due to the limitations explored previously where opportunistic companies 'merely pay lip service to inclusivity' failing to 'foster welcoming environments for LGBTQ+ staff and customers' (Hopkins 2021). Instead, the successes in working towards a reclamation of lost senses of queerness throughout the city's night-time economy here belongs to the performers that construct its thriving drag scene, not the bars that house them. Despite being socioeconomically hindered due their geographical positioning and the city's volatile and financially unstable drag market/night-time economy, local drag performers continue to exhibit persistence and devotion in showcasing their artistry. The hindrances that Nottingham elicits for performers include (i) a lack of monetary return despite their drag having high-cost investment, (ii) the building of competition within the drag community through the lack of opportunity, and (iii) a lacking regard for their physical and mental well-being. These hindrances evidence how lesser-metropolitan regions embolden the already precarious nature of drag performer occupations. Through their efforts to keep drag thriving in Nottingham, with its scarcity of queer safe space, work towards a reclamation of the queerness that the city has unfortunately lost. In several ways then, Nottingham performers undergo a form of transcendence: from local public figure to a heightened form of queer activist through their fight for reclaiming and establishing forms of queer visibility in the local night-time economy.

4.5) Comparing Metropolitan and Lesser-Metropolitan Queer Nightlife: Manchester and Nottingham

> The pond is so much smaller here in Nottingham than it is in other places like Manchester or even London. We have less places to go, less places to be who we are […] and that obviously affects us (Participant 3).

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[21] Whilst this is only a brief section of this chapter, issues around the opportunity for drag and the precarious occupational landscape Nottingham provides *through* its lack of queer venues will be thoroughly explored in the following chapter (5).

The term metropolis can be simply understood as a space that 'produces […] a sort of surplus value' and is characterised by its high levels of 'density', 'population size' and 'heterogeneity' (Brantz, et al, 2014, 11). Subject to relentless changes of pace, such spaces rely on 'inadequate urban-economic infrastructure' that heightens issues of 'increased competitiveness, infrastructure development […] [and] the remapping of state space' (Harrison and Hoyler, 2014, 2249). Despite being a medium-sized city, Nottingham has a population size of over '300,000' people and whilst this population situates it ahead of cities such as Derby (250,000), it also positions it *behind* other local cities like Leicester (350,000) (Eurostat, 2022). These cities however are far surpassed by other larger UK-based metropolises such as the capital city of London (8.9 million) (Eurostat, 2022). Whilst Nottingham is characterised as being a 'metropolitan' city with its own independent neoliberal economy (as evidenced by my discussions of its complex night-time economy earlier in this chapter) its metropolitan status is *betwixt* its surrounding UK cities, which situates it as a *lesser*-metropolitan city.

This section of the chapter, (which will be replicated in Chapter 6 with a chapter specific focus), investigates the nuanced similarities and differences between the queer scenes of Nottingham and Manchester. This section does so by critically comparing the efficacy of queer visibility and accessibility to queer safe spaces in their respective local night-time economies. These sections will utilise interview datasets from both the fifteen Nottingham-based performers (referenced throughout this thesis) and five Manchester-based participants. As such, in these sections, participant citations will be: Participant *Number* (Nottingham-Based – as referenced throughout) and Participant M *Number* (Manchester-based). Existing literature that surrounds the research focus of this thesis appears to prioritise investigations of more-metropolitan areas[22]. Subsequently, locations and cities such as Nottingham, which is the focus of this thesis, can be deemed far *less* metropolitan than superpowers like London and New York City (USA). Through the disparity between these economic and social geographies, 'city competitiveness' (Campkin and Marshall 2018, 82) is established between national cities that exist *beneath* the metropolitan status of those superpowers. Participants from this project infer that the city of Manchester, despite having a population that is significantly smaller than London, is much more of a metropolis than Nottingham.

Participant perceptions of Manchester being *more* metropolitan than Nottingham is not solely attributed to its population size, but through its facilitation of accessibility for local marginalised

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[22] As discussed in the literature review of this thesis.

LGBTQIA+ communities through the operation and proliferation of its queer-centric spaces, scenes, and venues. Participant 1 exemplifies this:

> Here in Nottingham, it is very different to other places that have bigger gay communities like Manchester and London. Manchester isn't even *that* much bigger than us, and yet its city and the life it creates isn't even comparable to us. They have entire sections of the city devoted to celebrating them. We have nothing, barely any bars, nothing. In Manchester, you are swamped by them. Nottingham seems to make an onward struggle for us […] and I can understand why people would be nervous to do drag here […] Manchester is *twice* the city as Nottingham (Participant 1).

This example speaks directly to the production of heteronormative space that dominates Nottingham's city geography that has been explored throughout this chapter. Here though, Participant 1 makes direct comparison to the failure of Nottingham in sustaining its queer nightlife to the success of Manchester's queer nightlife scene. In stark contrast to the experiences in Nottingham's nocturnal economy, Manchester-based participants discuss the success of Manchester's and its abundance of LGBTQIA+ spaces: 'Manchester really does have one of the biggest queer nightlife scenes in the UK, everywhere you turn there is a new bar to welcome you' (Participant M2) and 'we are very lucky here, Manchester provides queer people with a plethora of venues to feel good and to feel safe in […] the same can't be said for smaller cities' (Participant M5).

Manchester notably has a renowned and thriving queer scene characterised by its 'gay village'[23], which at the time of writing comprises of 34 LGBTQIA+ centric venues (Manchester Bars, 2024). Where Nottingham has failed to sustain queer sectors of its local night-time economy, Manchester's appears to flourish. This suggests not only major differences in the prevalence of queer safe space between the cities' local night-time economies, but also in the *effect* those spaces have on their local queer communities. Whilst Nottingham-based participants have frequently criticised Nottingham's lack of authentic queer safe spaces, which burdens local communities with a perceived higher threat of discriminatory violence and hinder their efforts around free sexual expression. Manchester-based participants contrastingly report heightened feelings of safety around Manchester's gay village which permits their 'sexual authenticity' (Participant M1) and builds a 'kind of gated community, separate from people we don't want to and shouldn't have to be around' (Participant M5). In these ways Manchester's gay village echoes the concept of 'gayborhoods' referenced earlier. Through the geographical separation of the city's queer and heteronormative nightlife sectors, the village also works towards the fortification of queer safety that is intrinsic to the success of queer spaces (Hartal,

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[23] Manchester's *Gay Village* is a geographical space within the city that is devoted to queer nightlife and entertainment, including the renowned *Canal Street.*

2018) and disrupts heteronormative dominance in its complex night-time economy. Nottingham-based Participant 15 even notes how much 'safer' they feel in Manchester's night-time economy because of the proliferation of its queer nightlife: 'there is so much there that opens its arms to you, that it's hard to not feel safe […] I can't say the same for Nottingham'.

Manchester, as a larger metropolis with its higher population and larger queer community, provides queer nightlife with a high capability for financial success. Therefore, the conscription of gay villages, such as that in Manchester, as commodified sectors of the 'neoliberal city is consequential for their function and inclusivity' since their survival depends on their ability to make a profit (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2017, 789). Participant 1 M states: 'There has been some closures of bars in the city, but they get replaced soon enough by another great gay bar'. This is in direct contrast to the degradation of Nottingham's queer nightlife sector discussed throughout this chapter, which implies Manchester's increased promise of profitability through the establishing of queer safe spaces in the night-time economy. Since Nottingham is a *smaller* site for the forms of queer convergence that sustain queer nightlife sectors, it fails to evidence the same high profitability that larger regions such as Manchester do through the success of queer event spaces in their local nocturnal economies.

Despite working towards a geographical separation of queer and heteronormative venues Manchester's queer nightlife sector remains open to both the 'leisure and tourist market' of the city (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2017, 789). This accessibility of queer spaces to heteronormative audiences in addition to the queer audiences they directly appeal to, is a common expectancy of queer nightlife venues. Manchester, like Nottingham, contains heteronormative bars that hold irregular queer events in attempts to capitalise upon the city's pre-established pink economy that the gay village signifies. Manchester-based Participant 4 M explains: 'there are still a lot of bars throughout the city that aren't queer-based but will have gay nights and events pretty regularly […] because they know that its profitable to do so in Manchester'. Direct parallels can be drawn here to the opportunistic operation of Nottingham's queer events. Performers' reception of these kinds of events differs based on their location. Manchester participants tend to appreciate these events as it 'spreads queer joy throughout the city' not limiting to 'just canal street' (Participant 4 M) and 'leaves a gay stamp on the wider city' (Participant 2 M). As has already been discussed, Nottingham participants often criticise this heteronormative infiltration into local queer scenes and consider it exploitative. One of the clear differences between the cities that can explain these contrasting perceptions is that, for Manchester's queer communities, these event places act as an *extension* of an already prevalent and thriving queer sector of the local night-time economy. In Nottingham such venues are the *only* sites that facilitate spaces of queer safety. The reliance on heteronormative venues, which fail to ensure queer safety, to establish queerness in the night-time economy leaves Nottingham-based

participants with no alternative. In contrast, Manchester provides its communities with several options that are located both inside and outside of its gay village, thereby establishing queer visibility across the city and only working to increase their accessibility to queer safe spaces.

4.6) Conclusions

Throughout this chapter several arguments have been made that evidence the de-queering of Nottingham's city space, through the persistent closure of queer-orientated independent venues operating in the local night-time economy with no intervention from the governing city council. Additionally, new attempts to promote a resurgence of queer nightlife within Nottingham have been criticised here, indicating its severely limited nature and the contradictory practice elicited through its mistreatment, exploitation, and lack of appreciation for the marginalised communities it seeks to cultivate. The culprits are non-queer-led/oriented bars and nightclubs which belong to larger corporate chains and umbrella companies, who seek to opportunistically profit from this historical de-queering and financially dominate independent venues and independent queer event organisers/promoters. They commit only so far by devoting very few event-nights to this cause, usually inaccessible Sundays, which would be deemed unprofitable to wider audiences and demographics without the focus of these communities who have few other options for safe queer spaces within this medium-sized city. Furthermore, the drag performers who I argue are utilised as a tool with which to "queer up" these events so that they appear more inclusive, and who it should be stated are part of the constructed queer community these companies seek to infiltrate, are further mistreated through low rates of pay or even a complete lack of payment at all. Equally problematic in nature, is the geographical positioning and operation of these event places regarding the lack of safeguarding for marginalised LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals and communities – both physically and mentally.

Queer nightlife in Nottingham has therefore adapted itself to work in the neoliberal space of the city, despite a significant number of closures that have led to its demise. It has done so through the temporary queering of heteronormative nightlife spaces: 'highlighting the dynamic profile of queer nightlife and - in spite of the recent spate of closures - its striking resilience and adaptability' (Campkin and Marshall, 2018, 85). Whilst the work of drag performers exemplifies attempts to re-establish queer visibility and interrupt the heteronormative dominance across Nottingham's night-time economy, these efforts are undermined by the capitalist ideals of highly profitable companies that remain the only facilitators of those performances. The investigation of Nottingham's queer scene is much needed, and despite their limitations, these heteronormative bars still offer some much-needed benefit to the queer community. However, this is only due to the complete lack of queer visibility and

options within the night-time economy's physical queer venues. The importance of queer nightlife is only appreciated when deemed to be financially beneficial for the hosting companies' intervention. The latter stages of this chapter help to illuminate some of the potential differences between this lesser-metropolitan city and bigger metropolitan locations such as Manchester and its associated night-time economies/cultures, thus justifying the need for explorations into these smaller regional locations. Where lesser-metropolitan regions (Nottingham) evidence a failure to establish effective queer safety in its night-time economy through scarcity of LGBTQIA+ venues, more metropolitan queer scenes (Manchester) provide marginalised queer communities with an abundance of profitable *and* independent queer venues. These venues are intrinsic to a thriving queer community, since they heighten both city-wide queer visibility *and* synonymously greater senses of queer safety that work to negate the threat of heteronormative violence that its city space elicits.

Chapter 5

Setting the Stage: Altering the Drag Industry Landscape at the Local Level

This chapter takes sole focus on the UK's drag industry and considers the external factors that have helped to re-shape it. One key factor is the globalisation of the art form through an increased visibility of drag. I argue how this has been catalysed not only by changing social contexts and an arguably greater acceptance of queer marginalised communities over time, but primarily through the wide social media and reality television coverage gained by drag transnationally through a variety of media and platforms.

Throughout the last decade an increase in the popularity, consumption and even participation in/of drag has positively correlated with the rising social significance and popularity of franchises such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR)* and less popular formats like *Dragula*. The mainstream successes of such reality TV shows are argued to have significantly increased accessibility for drag in forms of engagement and consumption for both existing LGBTQIA+ audiences and newer, more heteronormative audiences transnationally. This expanded globalisation of drag and its audiences inevitably invites commoditisation of the form, which I argue drives this re-shaping of the industry itself. Whilst these changes are multidimensional, those focused on here include the operation of the performers collectively who are involved in the industry as well as shifts in the ideologies and experiences of the individuals that construct it. It should be noted that Nottingham remains my clear focus, despite a wider appreciation of these transnational contexts.

Whilst interrogating the drag industry's globalisation, it is important to examine the very definition of the term: 'every study of globalisation should include a careful and critical examination of the term itself' (Scholte, 2002, 3). Defining globalisation is tricky, and simple definitions refer to the influence and operation of business on international scales. Yet Scholte critiques varying academic definitions of globalisation and instead calls for the appreciation of a definition that: 'identifies globalisation as the spread of transplanetary – and in recent times more particularly supraterritorial – connections between people' (2002, 13). It is this definition which I utilise for all discussions in this project. This is since Scholte's discussions here directly speak to the global expansion of drag's popularity and consumption, as it declares that 'people become more able – physically, legally, culturally, and psychologically – to engage with each other in one world' and it 'refers to a shift in the nature of social space' (Scholte, 2002, 14). Globalisation is inextricably linked theorisation of neoliberalism, since both are ideologically driven by economy and work towards similar ideals of privatisation, the removal of commercial barriers, and increasing economic growth. In closer relation to this project, I contend both

conjure a logic of capitalism that promotes a 'reconceptualisation of firm competition' that has a strong 'locational implication' (Cox, 1995, 213). Globalisation then, is the process of increasing interdependence and interconnectedness amongst economies, cultures, communities, and societies globally (Steger, 2020). This process catalyses complex economic and social changes as result, which will be explored throughout this chapter in relation to the effect of drag's globalisation on local drag scenes.

The first section of this chapter, (5.1) begins to address how external factors (such as the catalysis of drag's visibility and popularity through reality television) have altered and re-shaped the structure of the UK drag industry over time, situating performers in a new industrial environment. This early section will also introduce Warner (2002) and Zaslow's (2022) conceptualisations of publics and counterpublics to discuss the conflict between local drag and its mainstream televised counterparts. I pay specific attention here to how local performers respond to that conflict by adapting to the demands that globalised and mainstream drag media has elicited in the cultural imaginary, thus embodying the characteristics of glocalisation (which will be further articulated later in this chapter). The following section (5.2) addresses issues of opportunity for local performers, in their pursuit of work in the city and how that same pursuit is directly affected by the changing drag industry.

5.1) Shifting the Industry: Globalisation and Commodification

The changing landscapes of drag industries have been well documented in academia and as already mentioned, *RPDR* has undoubtedly been integral to this tectonic-like shift from drag as an art form to drag as a globalised commodity. This is corroborated by several academics: 'today's drag culture is celebrified, professionalised, commercially viable, brand-oriented and mainstream' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 386) and 'the telecasting of RPDR since 2009 has aided the promotion of drag as a recognised art form throughout mainstream society' (Baxter et al, 2022, 4, A). The show, and more so its dominant influence in drag-related contexts, has however been criticised for its commercialisation of drag. For many, the monumental success of *RPDR* is problematic in this way since 'it is detrimental for drag to be commercially dominated by a single brand [like *RPDR*] due to the extensive diversity of drag culture' (Baxter et al, 2022, 4, A). The true detriment of this commercialisation and globalisation should not be simply reduced to issues around diversity. The complications around this commodification are instead more far-reaching and widespread, since they speak to neoliberalism's 'respatialisation of social life' at both local and global levels (Scholte, 2002, 33).

In the following discussions I adopt the linked concepts of publics and counterpublics, theorised by Warner (2002), and apply them to the consequences of drag's mainstreaming on its local industries.

Publics can be simply understood as groups of people that share common interests, concerns, or identities within the public sphere. In addition to these more common understandings of public, which are defined by social totality and concrete audiences/groups, Warner suggests that a third sense of discourse-based public exists: a 'kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation' (Warner, 2002, 50). Publics, here hold the potential to establish dominant ideologies and perpetuate discourses that are consumed at global and local levels. Counterpublics are a subset of publics that oppose the ideological constructions of their dominant counterparts, structured by different dispositions whilst maintaining 'awareness of [their] subordinate status' (Warner, 2002, 86). According to Warner, we might even regard queer culture as its own form of counterpublic, where LGBTQIA+ communities produce counter-discourses to their surrounding forms of hegemonic discourse and in several ways assume a subordinate status through them (2002). These two forms of publics should not be considered as fixed entities. Instead, as Warner explains, they often intersect with one another and influence one another's development (2002). Since the formation of a counterpublic is a direct response to its surrounding mainstream forms of public discourse, whilst being separated by its subordinate status, it is inherently shaped by them.

Warner's theoretical framing of publics and counterpublics, although relevant, does not directly consider drag performance as creating a form of public. Other academics however have made direct correlation between drag and this theory claiming the existence of drag-oriented publics. Zaslow's work then becomes useful in our application of this theory to drag industries. Zaslow suggests that, through its altering of drag's subcultural terrain and by establishing new spaces of collective opinion, the mainstream *RPDR* forms a type of public that is culturally canonical and influential over its 'counterpublic' of 'drag at the local level' (Zaslow, 2022, 5). This suggests that whilst local forms of drag are not ruled by their more mainstream counterparts, they *are* persistently and ideologically informed and directed by them. Observing local drag and the mainstream drag of *RPDR* through these public/counterpublic lenses, allows us to consider shifts in the UK drag industry as direct responses to *RPDR.* I argue that the co-existence of carefully curated mainstream drag and less edited forms of live drag, in local and regional scenes, creates evident points of difference that establish several contrasts between the two. Zaslow argues that *RPDR* has directly 'created a bigger market for drag, which combined with greater mass visibility, suggests a shift in the configuration of the drag scene itself' (2022, 2). Therefore, local drag which was once considered a marginal subculture has developed into a form of counterpublic influenced and indirectly driven by mainstream publics of drag like the infamous show (Zaslow, 2022, 2). In its replication of and inspiration taken from the drag public of *RPDR,* I argue that local drag counterpublics cement their own subordination and become an extension of *RPDR's* commercialisation of drag.

Drag from its historical origins up until recent times has been a form of subculture and its characteristics 'included broader marginalisation, a language and norms shared by its members, a specific and shared geographical space, a sense of community identity and an understanding that it is subcultural' (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 5). As McCormack and Wignall rightly state we must be cautious when discussing drag in the UK mainstream to avoid 'a simplistic narrative of historical erasure' by assuming a lack of success, especially as the opposite can be highlighted through individuals like 'Danny La Rue, Hinge and Bracket, and Lily Savage' (2022, 5). These individuals, despite their mainstream success, seemed to be 'exceptions to the broader marginalisation and appropriation of drag performance' (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 5). These kinds of exceptions, however, have now become increasingly more frequent, since we have entered a more liberal social epoch whereby more drag performers accumulate wealth and gain celebrity status. *RPDR* has 'provided a route into' the UK mainstream for drag especially since wider forms of cultural engagement related to drag have occurred including exhibitions from national museums, ongoing publications of drag-based literature, and increasing numbers of drag conventions and shows (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 6-7). However, the prevalence of this televised platform cannot be attributed as a sole factor in this change since its mainstreaming has coincided with British society becoming 'more liberal regarding aspects of personal sexuality' (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 7). When observing these changes in the cultural significance of drag and the velocity in which it propels itself into the mainstream, it is important to consider its consumers.

Changes in the cultural visibility and consumption of drag by the formation of drag publics has led to alterations within the composition of its audiences. Baxter et al clearly indicate this through work on the 'changing audiences' of UK drag shows where they state that this 'popularisation has created a more diverse audience attending these events' (2022, B). This is since drag events which were 'once exclusively attended by the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly gay men' now attract 'a large number of women, younger people, and heterosexuals' (Baxter et al, 2022, B). Elsewhere Baxter et al suggest that *RPDR* is unquestionably the catalyst for these shifts since its 'DragCon events attract tens of thousands of fans' and '60% of the event attendees at these events are women, with 50% classifying as straight, highlighting that the audience is now broader and more diverse' (2022, 4, A). These changes in audiences are corroborated by many of the discussions held with Nottingham-based participants: 'the audience is really mixed between queers and straights and this is the product of *Drag Race*' (Participant 3), and 'you find that audiences now are so much more mixed than they used to be – you don't find gay men at a drag brunch very often for example, but you will find a lot of straight people' (Participant 15). These discussions on the reconstruction of global and UK drag audiences raise interesting questions for the UK drag industry. Namely how does this neoliberal infiltration and

mainstreaming alter its construction and operation? Alongside addressing this question, I wish to continue considerations of local drag scenes as types of counterpublic, subordinate to the drag public of *RPDR.* Whilst being informed by the influence of that dominating public, the counterpublic of local drag operates with nuanced similarities and differences. Discussions here explore the ways in which the changing landscape of drag can be thematically isolated. Therefore, following discussions have consequently been separated into themes identified in the shifting industry landscape of drag. Whilst differences between the two forms exist, their merging and overlap becomes increasingly evident.

All fifteen Nottingham-based performers noted that they had felt changes within the industry over recent years, with most associating that change with *RPDR*: 'the industry has changed drastically in the last few years because of *Drag Race'* (Participant 1) and 'it is *Drag Race* that's done it […] it's kind of created an actual industry for drag' and 'now it's become an actual career' (Participant 2). Participant 2 even goes on to directly question if these new and fruitful potentials for UK drag at the local level would be possible without the success of this drag public: 'in the back of my head I have to think is it only because *Drag Race* has come to the mainstream?'. These notions of public and counterpublic discourse echo Scholte's definition of globalisation which I referred to at the beginning of this chapter, enforcing ideas around shifts in social space, commoditisation, and industry operations. This can be directly related to Roland Roberton's work on 'glocalisation', whereby a product (which I argue here is drag) is developed globally through the public dominance of *RPDR* and its invention of new 'consumer traditions' is adapted and accommodated by its regionally specific counterpublics of local drag (Robertson, 1994, 37). The dynamics of globalisation and glocalisation around *RPDR* involves a complex interplay between the show's global reach, and the adaptation and interpretation of its mainstream characteristics in local drag scenes. Local drag scenes have embraced the show's ethos and stylistic characteristics and incorporated it into their own performance styles and their events. This process then involves a fusion of global and local influence, which ultimately leads to the glocalisation of mainstream drag culture. Following discussions within this chapter explore the responses of local performers', through their global product adaptations, to the altered industry landscape that drag publics like *RPDR* have laid out for them.

(i)   Desaturation of Artistic Integrity

Drag is so much more commercial now in Nottingham (Participant 1).

A prevalent theme that became apparent across both the participant interview data obtained through this project and through analyses of existing literature, is the watering down of drag's subversive

nature and a diminishing appreciation for its artistic qualities. This is closely related to the mainstreaming of the art form in the face of its increased globalisation and through its changing/growing audiences. Discussions around the subversive nature of drag permeate various research fields where drag-based work is created. Butler foregrounds these analyses through discussing drag's ability to demonstrate how gender is formed through types of performance (Butler, 1999). The subversive nature of drag has since been discussed widely in academic debates. A stream of this debate that I wish to raise attention to is that which problematises and questions the efficacy of mainstream drag's subversive potential. These arguments are closely tied to critiques and considerations of the omnipotence and omnipresence of a capitalist agenda, which has a 'sanitising effect' on art forms as a direct consequence of 'mass consumption' (Zaslow, 2022, 4). Moreover, in this case, the commercialism of drag has been radically heightened through the mainstream success and cultural dominance of the drag public *RPDR*. The subversive potential of local drag work, in some cases, is threatened by a pressure to replicate the mainstream. For example, more subversive drag styles (such as alternative and genderfuck drag) become subordinate to more palatable drag forms that imitate that which the drag public represents.

Feldman and Hakim suggest that drag's continued commercialisation and globalisation provokes 'a dampening of drag's subversive potential – a constraining of its politics of critique' which generates 'a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in consumption' and acts as 'a vehicle for enterprise' (2020, 387-8). The ways in which the mainstreaming of drag limits drag's ability for subversion is exemplified by the experiences of drag performers interviewed for this study. While some participants simply acknowledge the mainstreaming of the UK drag industry: 'drag is so much more commercial now […] you can take your straight auntie to a drag show and it's normal' (Participant 1), other participants offer more deep-rooted evidence into drag's de-radicalisation. The widening accessibility of drag and its new inclusion of more heteronormative audiences, as discussed prior, may be seen to persuade local drag performers to establish a more sanitised and curated approach to senses of queerness in their own work.

Across many participant interviews, there is frequent reference to a particular Nottingham-based duo of drag performers who have historically been renowned for their 'alternative', 'gender-bending' and 'subversively non-mainstream' approach to drag (Participant 13). Thought-provokingly, this alternative drag performer duo have now been reported to have diluted the tone and content of their work to commercially appeal to the mainstream audiences that the UK drag industry now beckons. This example therefore speaks to and gives substance to the precarities that Feldman and Hakim evidence concerns around (2020) regarding the commodification of drag. This is most clearly demonstrated when Participant 1 notes this renowned drag duo 'are being quite clever now and being

more accommodating to muggles'[24] and their performances are now 'prescriptive' as 'you see the same routines every week […] because there are certain marks to hit'. This is especially reflective of performers' need to accommodate the changing audience of Nottingham's drag events for their occupational survival. This is due to drag's cultural mainstreaming: 'the audience now is really mixed between queers and straights and they want a particular look and feel since they now have particular opinions on what a drag queen is' (Participant 3). It should be noted that the location that facilitates the events by these performers is one of the leading heteronormative chain corporation-owned bars in Nottingham, which was discussed in the previous chapter. We should consider the heteronormative nature of the bar that holds this drag event, as it is all about 'cheese on toast [referring to a more mainstream and less subversive form of drag] and that's not what they [the drag duo in question] are and so they are adapting their drag for the venue' (Participant 1). Participant 1 here argues that the style of their work would have to be dampened for the mainstream audience the event place beckons, since it has steered away from their alternative routes and have opted for "campy" drag forms that are more commercially viable. The bar opts for these palatable forms of drag over the artistic work of the performers' choosing who describes their drag as 'more subversive than simple, cheesy, and overdone drag' (Participant 1). Therefore, the work of the performer takes a different and fully commodified form in this instance, where its tone and artistic integrity is altered and desaturated to appeal to the new audiences of the local drag economy. Yet, we should be careful about critiquing the performers themselves. As I will discuss throughout this thesis, there are varying obstacles in the path of local performers regarding opportunity and financial stability that force them to take work under these conditions. The audience expectation of drag performers and their respective shows are shifting and local performers adapt their work to survive in the new drag scene: 'performers work began changing so that it could survive […] and they realised this during the pandemic, as starving artists, that they had to do something more commercially viable' (Participant 13).

Participant 14 also notes how these alterations of the above drag duo's alternative work has changed the very image of the local drag landscape: 'there was an alternative drag scene, and then that collapsed […] now there's a kind of void where the alternative drag once was'. This perception infers that it is not only the work of individual performers that is being influenced and re-shaped by the changed and mainstreamed drag industry, but also the very diversity of drag in Nottingham's local night-time economy itself. Drag as an art form is known for its endless variants of stylistic form and type. If this diversity is endangered by placing new focus on mainstream and more commercially viable drag over drag's other more subversive forms, its subversive potential becomes endangered also

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[24] Through the lexical term 'muggle', raising connotations with popular culture related terminology, the participant refers to heteronormative "non-queer" audiences.

(Zaslow, 2022). Through this, some performers become even more at risk of becoming an 'object of socio-economic exclusion' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 387) should they not meet the demands of the mainstream. These discussions then lead us to question: 'what becomes of the politics of subversion and opposition that are so intimately linked to an outsider subjectivity when that outsider is suddenly welcomed into the world of mainstream celebrity?' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 387). Many of the participants agree that notions of subversion are key for their interest in and adoration of drag: 'drag for me is about subversion' (Participant 13), and 'I definitely think that the subversive nature of drag is key. As soon as you lose that and you want to become a product, a marketable consumable product, it gets rid of everything that drag stands for' (Participant 9). These perceptions echo the concerns of Feldman and Hakim: in tailoring drag for commercial, mainstream, and potentially heteronormative audiences, drag performers 'are increasingly becoming willing agents of the hegemonic power that previously denied them' (2020, 398).

Furthermore, publics like that of *RPDR* have prioritised certain types of drag over others. We have already established that new non-queer audiences have been introduced to drag through the public of RPDR, and as such the palatable forms of drag that public chooses to promote become the mainstream. Through this melting pot of audiences, the already subcultural forms of drag (like the more alternative forms referred to above) are pushed further into the margins of culture even in the very drag scenes that they help to construct. Participant 1 highlights this once again referring to the performer duo referenced throughout this section: 'they now do their show, which is so much less diverse and subversive than their work used to be which is unfortunate' (Participant 9). This duo however act only as a small example of wider trends in both the local community and larger UK drag industry. In Nottingham, participants cite other cases in which performers adapt and commercialise their work. Six of the participants state that they regularly perform at drag brunches, and the *RPDR* viewing shows (all taking place in predominantly heteronormative venues). Again, this highlights the local drag industry's accommodation for heteronormative audiences *and* queer audiences to meet precedents that the globally branded drag public *RPDR* has set for them. Performer's embodiment and submission to the pressures of glocalisation here complicates the local assertions of culture and identity amongst local performers (Robertson, 1994, 40), who feel that to succeed they must forego their own artistic integrity and instead replicate the image of mainstream drag.

Furthering this discussion is the 'recent surge in popularity of [local] drag brunches' which attracts attendees 'of all genders and sexual orientation' (Baxter et al, A, 3). For some participants these kinds of events are watered down forms of drag and are exploitative (especially since they occur in heteronormative settings): 'drag brunches are something that places do […]to get the pink pound and to get some extra cash. It doesn't make you feel good. When drag was never about anything financial

[…] we had a power – we are starting to lose that, and it does become a financial machine above anything else' (Participant 6). Participant 15 even explicitly expresses their distaste for the ways in which they must tailor their performance at such events: 'I have to sing an array of songs, which I'm sick of singing but the audience love them, and it's my job to entertain there'. Therefore, the increasing inclusion of 'straight' (Participant 15) audiences in heteronormative venues in Nottingham's scene is having a direct impact on the ways in which that scene functions, the types of drag it promotes, and the artistic fulfilment of its performers. Through the adaptation and commercialising of a performer's own work it begins to reflect the watered down and commercial drag of *RPDR*, which refuses to showcase alternative gender-bending drag that might not be deemed appropriate or appealing for its wider (and notably non-queer) audiences. The image and forms of drag that could be considered highly-subversive such as that of alternative or genderfuck drag is often omitted from the focus of the drag public (*RPDR*), which instead shows preference for high-cost garments, simple lip-syncing, and mild comedy.

It is this kind of mainstreaming which 'limits the viewer to a simpler comprehension of drag as the show strives to contain contradictory representations and constrain gender performativity within its institutional boundaries' (Buck, 2019, 15). Informed by the mainstream images and ideologies conjured and perpetuated in the mainstream by drag publics like *RPDR*, local performers of drag are threatened by further marginalisation should they not conform to those expectations, styles and forms of mainstream drag. Counterpublics long to develop their own public visibility to negate the gap between them and their dominating public, whilst potentially rejecting some of the ideologies it represents (Warner, 2002). It is then understandable how the potentially subversive counterpublics that local drag performers create, through their constant subordination to mainstreamed media-situated drag and need for increased visibility, seek validation through mainstream drag audience response. If drag counterpublics (local drag) reject characteristics of their dominant public *RPDR*, they have the potential to challenge the newly developed cultural norms it has catalysed in the drag industry. Yet, this potential is diminished through counterpublics' mere replication of those same characteristics. This then highlights how 'for those marginalised by the normative social order, then, publics can become yet another site of marginalisation' (Zaslow, 2022, 4). Their marginalisation is further cemented by local performers' commitment to an artistic recreation of *RPDR's* image of drag for local audiences. In their artistic replication of the drag public, local drag reproduces its perpetuated image of drag in ways that might easily be deemed less impressive and/or appealing to local audiences. Performers operating in local lesser-metropolitan drag scenes are known to elicit

fewer financial opportunities than *RPDR* contestants[25], and so it is unlikely that they can afford to successfully emulate the costly glamorous drag of *RPDR.* Through their continued attempts to look and perform like *RPDR* contestants, despite their financial challenges, local performers become an extension of its commoditisation cementing its dominance alongside their own subordination. They rebrand the drag of *RPDR*, adapting it to and promoting it in local markets. This commercially motivated appropriation that local performers employ (and the counterpublic they construct) establishes complex interplay between local and global forces that aligns with the characteristics of neoliberal glocalisation (Robertson, 1994). This insistence on appropriation works to alter the very look and feel of local drag scenes themselves, as seen through participants' comments above. So much so that local drag scenes reject the diversity that alternative drag forms establish, re-shaping themselves into the mainstream mould of *RPDR* vis-à-vis local performer's replication of its celebrified contestants*.* Reflecting homogenisation, the widespread impact of *RPDR* directly contributes to the standardisation of performance in smaller drag communities.

These arguments can be problematised through discussions like those made by McCormack and Wignall who state that one mustn't ignore the subversive potentials of mainstream drag because it 'provides an avenue for queer performers to thrive where other cultural arenas remain heteronormative' (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 15). Whilst this point carries some weight, the mainstreaming of drag *has* undoubtedly shifted the terrain of local drag communities and it is clearly a concern for not only academics involved in the subversive realm of drag but also those who construct local scenes in its associated industries, such as those interviewed for this project.

(ii)   An Unsaid Criteria of Drag: Financial Investment and Stylistic Shifts

> I think that Drag Race and the ideals it has created is the death of drag. I really do (Participant 9).

Leading from the above discussions on the dilution of drag's subversive and artistic nature, this section seeks to understand another aspect of the commercially motivated appropriation performed in local drag industries shaped by the dominant drag publics. As noted earlier, *RPDR* remains the most influential drag public and its global success is recognised as detrimental to how local and wider drag industries respectively operate now. This section suggests how audiences who enter into engagement with drag *through* drag publics are potentially conditioned into having particular and narrow

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[25] Arguments around this focus appear later in the chapter: (5.2)

expectations of drag generally, and more importantly, of local drag performers and their work. This, in turn, pressures performers to either adapt or succumb to these expectations.

In their work on drag and its publics and counterpublics, Zaslow states:

> *RPDR*, as a drag "public," establishes drag performance standards, enforced explicitly through the judges' critiques. These standards also impact drag performers at the local level, regardless of whether they have been (or want to be) on *RPDR* themselves. To consider *RPDR* queens as the unequivocal "best of the best" is debatable, yet there remains a baseline caliber of polish expected of contestants. *RPDR* solidifies its standards most obviously in judges' runway critiques (Zaslow, 2022, 7).

Echoing Zaslow, I contend that, drag publics such as *RPDR* and the global success they have obtained, re-orient an altered set of standards – or unspoken criteria – around drag for both audiences/consumers *and* the local creators of drag. Zaslow firstly implies that performers on the show exert a particular kind of "polish" and curation that inherently distinguish them from local drag performers working *before* the social phenomenon of *RPDR.* All fifteen Nottingham-based participants note that they themselves are *different* and distinguishable from their counterparts on the show – or '*Ru-Girls*' as they are known. This is signified clearly by Participant 9 who describes ex-contestants from the show as 'the elite of the drag world'. Zaslow in the above statement places much importance not only on the 'calibre of polish expected of contestants on the shows' but more specifically on how *RPDR* 'solidifies its standards' through the persistence of judges' critiques' (2022, 7). These critiques are central to the action of the show, routinely given by a set of judges to the contestants as their execution of weekly challenges, and aesthetic-centred runways are dissected: 'critiques centre around how well the runway assignment was executed, but often extend further to the queens' performances in the week's main challenge and cumulatively throughout the competition' (Zaslow, 2022, 8). Whilst it might be easy to regard these critiques to serve a harmless narrative function for the show, it has a discursive impact on performers in regional and more local levels. Participant 13 declares that *RPDR* and its success has created a 'stream of easily digestible Rupaul-esque kind of, packaged material of typically female impersonation' from local scenes and in the wider UK drag industry alike. The replication of *"*RuPaul-esque" drag therefore gives a kind of appreciation for how 'those taking part in these shows are ritualistically shamed for their appearance by the show's host, their peers, or the public' (Buck, 2019, 10). Drawing from Foucauldian notions, this highlights how the torture and public spectacle works to discipline 'disobedient bodies' (Buck, 2019, 10). Once again, whilst the drag public *RPDR* establishes forms of standardisation around drag, counterpublics at the local level are directly impacted by those audience pressures. Whilst these participants are cognisant of their subordination, they also admit adapting to them: 'you can't help but feel like you have to go along with it, you spend

the money, and you learn to look the part' (Participant 13). Once again performers embody neoliberal glocalisation by adapting their local product (i.e. drag) to suitably meet the standards and demands of both the global and local drag market (Robertson, 1994) that are influenced by the drag public *RPDR*, even if the counterpublic of their drag is faced with and therefore influenced by a multitude of hindrances that drag publics do not.

Zaslow's claims are confirmed by my participants' responses. All fifteen Nottingham-based performers repeatedly note how *RPDR* has constructed a new benchmark of alleged quality in drag through the representations it propels and favours: 'there are new kinds of images around drag that *Drag Race* has created and it usually reflects the idea that money equals a better quality of drag' (Participant 10). All fifteen Nottingham-based participants repeatedly addressed the large costs of drag and their own investments into their work: 'there is a high price that you have to pay to be a drag queen, I mean the money I have to spend is ridiculous' (Participant 5). Participants also detail the costs that they find to be high but also necessary for their drag:

> I mean I have a bunch of custom outfits and wigs. Some of my wigs have cost hundreds of pounds and my outfits way more than that. I mean I messaged a designer the other day and said "I really want to work with you". They said that their starting price was 400 pounds and it goes up depending on what customisations I want, and there was a 200 pound deposit. For one look, just for the basic level outfit without any of the customisations that I planned on adding. And I'm not saying that they don't over price because they charge what they charge for whatever, and they should be able to do that. That outfit ended up being close to £1000. But I needed it for upcoming shows (Participant 8).

Moncrieff and Lienard state that already: 'the financial expenses [of drag] are significant' as the acquisition of costumes and makeup, which is sometimes 'worth hundreds of dollars require sustained investments, seldom offset by the earnings' of the performer (2017, 2). As Moncrieff and Lienard's work with drag performers addresses, several performers believe that the high costs of being a drag performer 'is a core part' of its process (Moncrieff and Lienard, 2017, 9).[26] *RPDR* highlights the glamour, glitz and creativity that is integral to drag culture. It does so by showcasing a plethora of expensive, usually custom, garments for each challenge alongside pristine hairpieces, accessories, and props. However, in its pursuit to represent these aesthetically driven characteristics of drag, the show also expresses 'entrepreneurship [...] through drag as a never-ending body, fashion, and makeup project' (Buck, 2019, 6-7).

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[26] The following chapter will explore the financial investments and consequences of RPDR's and perpetuation of neoliberal ideology for regional drag performers more deeply. Here however, I wish to detail the pressures and standardisation of expectations which prompt these consequences and alter the nature of the drag industry.

A defining point of contention between the drag public of *RPDR* and drag counterpublics of local drag communities is the importance and accessibility of monetary capital for performers. It is the highly curated and high-budget versions of drag represented through mainstream drag publics which create 'an insular fantasy by situating itself, with RuPaul's blessing, as the dictator of acceptable, successful forms of drag' (Zaslow, 2022, 16). Participant 3 states that in *RPDR* 'it's all about how much money you have and that determines how successful you're going to be' and 'it's about how much money they [contestants] can spend on their outfits, and how much money they can spend on their hair. To me that's not what drag is about'. Echoing these discussions, whilst raising the very different economic situation of those who can afford to take part in *RPDR* and local performers, Participant 8 says that 'the show itself gives unfair standards of what drag should be because regional and local performers definitely can't afford those kinds of things'. Consequently, as suggested by this participant, the public '*RPDR*-imposed expectations' which inform and influence both consumers and creators of drag 'are arguably out of touch with what local drag actually is' and what it can afford to be (Zaslow, 2022, 13). Yet, the franchise and RuPaul themselves seem to be ignorant of this disparity. Throughout the many seasons of *RPDR* there is a perpetuated emphasis on the neoliberally enforced notion of entrepreneurialism whereby 'RuPaul always stresses that being poor should not be a block to success' (Buck, 2019, 7). This creates a further sense of encouragement for local performers to invest high amounts of money into their drag and this can be clearly seen through the regular use of 'when life gives you lemons make lemonade' on the show and any performer 'that dares to bring up material disadvantage inevitably faces criticism by the judges or the other contestants' (Buck, 2019, 7).

It goes without saying that drag can be an incredibly expensive form of performance art, but the high standards of drag on *RPDR* reflects larger scale monetary investment from its performers. Participant 3 highlights this clearly when they state how 'the lens of RuPaul has really made people think that they need to put much more money into things, and they need to have certain things on a checklist in order to be successful'. The representations of expensive and well invested drag through media representations can then be considered to encourage local performers to increase their already high investments further. Participant response reflects this pressure to invest due to *RPDR:* 'Whereas now, I feel like we have the pressures of *Drag Race*, and to be a perfect person like them is difficult and so expensive' (Participant 5), and '*Drag Race* has made everyone here step their drag up a lot and made them look more at all of the details they probably wouldn't have cared to look at before *Drag Race*, and spend more money to address those details' (Participant 2). Warner states that counterpublics such as local drag, like their dominant publics, are ideological in nature and that they provide 'a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society' (Warner, 2002, 81). This discussion correlates with participant testimonies discussed

here, whereby performers seek to achieve the same costly aesthetic grandeur that the public *RPDR* perpetuates despite the major differences in financial privilege between the performers engaged in those two forms of public.

This franchise also influences the *stylistic* choices made by local performers during performances. Participant 4 echoes previous discussion when they address how '*Drag Race* is now being used to measure a drag performer's success' and how a level of that success relies on 'how well you can look and act like a *Ru-Girl*'. The stylistic characterisations of drag have historically defied strict categorisation, and whilst many terms like 'alternative', 'pageant', 'genderfuck' etc. refer to some of the many styles and trends of drag, these terms do not have concrete definitions and nor is there a particular criterion to align a performer with them. Interestingly though, *RPDR* and its focus on specific styles and characteristics of drag might very well inform the stylistic choices of local performers. This illustrates yet another mode of influence from drag publics that are enacted around performers' art. Edgar notes how viewers of *RPDR* see 'examples of queer legitimacy […] through references to historically situated drag icons and practices' (Edgar, 2011, 135-6). The drag practices that the show focuses on, specifically those which are based in performance, have created a set of expectations around performance and aesthetics like those explored earlier. Each episode culminates in 'a lip sync contest' which acts as 'the program's primary elimination mechanism' (Vesey, 2017, 590).

The historical origins of links between lip-syncing and drag are hard to pinpoint, but a key point of its documentation can be found in Esther Newton's seminal work *Mother Camp* (1972). Here lip-syncing performances from the 1960s are clearly recounted. Over time, this form of queer performance art has become intrinsic to the drag performance industry. Similarly, vogueing[27] is yet another performance feature that is now commonly associated with drag culture. *RPDR* leans on these historical drag practices consistently through its season airings, usually far more than other performance practices which are also commonly associated with drag such as live singing and comedic stand up. Given the popularity and success of this media representation of drag the drag public, *RPDR* also works to shape widespread public opinion on not only what drag should look like, but also what its performances should comprise of.

Participant 14 indicates how they believe that the drag public's ideologies and expectations they determine have informed the performance choices of local drag scenes: 'All you ever see is lip-syncing now because of *Drag Race*. Hardly anyone sings live, hardly anyone does comedy, hardly anyone does… well anything!' (Participant 14). It might then be suggested that *RPDR* and its monumental

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[27] A dance form which originates from New York ballroom culture in the late 20th century and was propelled to the mainstream by the likes of Madonna.

popularity encourages specific styles of drag performance over others and therefore catalyses further drag industry-based shifts. It should be noted that in my 20 Nottingham-based observations of local drag performance, every performer showcased at least one act of lip-syncing. These examples are more reflective of the large influence of drag publics when considering how for forms such as lip-syncing 'it was not always the case' that they were popular in drag performance, and it is platforms like '*RuPaul's Drag Race*, the most visible and lucrative drag platform in the world' which have helped lip syncing to emerge from 'a cloud of scarcity' (Pasulka, 2019).

By placing such emphasis on these specific characteristics of performance styles/methods, *RPDR* creates a more commercialised and 'non-threatening' form of TV-worthy drag, 'which it uses to sell its products to a mainstream audience' (Buck, 2019, 5). What is particularly interesting here is how these commercialised forms of drag performance infiltrate the wider drag industry. In local communities, it can be suggested that there is changing and ongoing correlation between the stylistic impact of *RPDR* and stylistic changes made by local performers over time in their replication of the modes of performance drag publics highlight and perpetuate. This is clearly exemplified by Participant 7 who states the following:

> I don't like the way *RuPaul's Drag Race* has influenced newer queens in the local community. A little part of me dies when I see a queen, they might look incredible, but their performance will be a rip-off of a *Ru-Girl's* where they simply lip-sync to a catchy song and throw themselves around a stage vogueing and nearly always ending in a death drop. I think *Drag Race* has influenced people to put an emphasis on the things that aren't necessarily an important element of performance. It makes a *Drag Race* kind of lens around performances. A perfect lens (Participant 7).

These perceptions are also corroborated by Participant 4 who states that: 'people in the scene now rely on party tricks and honestly that's come from watching things like *Drag Race* and it gets dull because everything is the same and everyone becomes similar'. Not only does *RPDR* invite local industries to replicate certain modes of performance, but it also potentially conjures stereotypes through the representations of bodies and the drag it chooses to feature. This is specifically relevant when considering the bodies of performers. Participant 7 states: 'You have all these new stereotypes, that we see so much on the show, and now that is the same case in local scenes. You see more people who are so pristine and polished and presentable and nice, it's not always looked like that'.

In these stylistic appropriations of commercialised drag, the individualistic component of local drag performance becomes entangled with the artificial nature of mainstream performance of *RPDR*. In this way, drag publics also perpetuates neoliberal notions of investment for success: 'the counterpublic (local drag) necessarily comes up against the very norms that, in its subculture

configuration, it sought to challenge' and in creating 'a RPDR-sanctioned drag aesthetic' the local performance situates itself 'directly in the fraught space that the counterpublic inhabits, between public and subculture' (Zaslow, 2022, 12). Additionally, due to this replication local drag work is at risk of becoming 'depoliticised through neoliberal discourse' as the demand for continual investment of time and money for aesthetic 'privileges and maintains the impetus for competitive profitmaking above the needs and demands of disempowered groups' (Buck, 2019, 1). Participant 9 echoes these arguments: 'You sometimes get a feeling that you have to adapt the work you do and the way you market that work to appeal to people and the new audience shall we say. We are such capitalist little creatures'.

During interviews for this project, participants were questioned on their perceptions around a specific moment of notoriety from Season 2 of *RPDR UK*. The moment in question was the infamous critique of contestant Joe Black, who was chastised by RuPaul for wearing a dress that was simply purchased from the clothing store *H&M.* This 'thoughtless […] outburst' sparked worldwide controversy furthered by the surge of online activity including the hashtag 'H&M-gate' (Rasmussen, 2021). This outburst, as Rasmussen suggests, was regarded as 'tone-deaf' and it highlights the 'effect *Drag Race* can have on our wider community: one which decrees if you're not wearing a custom look, you're not doing drag properly' (Rasmussen, 2021). Participant response echoes Rasmussen's criticism: 'It just adds so much pressure and it means that queens now think you can't get anything from any online retailers or affordable places. Everything you should wear has to be custom made. And that's a pressure to sacrifice your money and income, even if you can't afford to' (Participant 7). Participant 7 addresses the persistent perpetuation of neoliberal ideals, namely that of entrepreneurialism through self-investment, through drag publics and their reliance on showcasing harsh critiques of drag to create media content. This places new kinds of pressures on performers at the local level and cements the notions of standardisation that drag publics establish. Most Nottingham-based participants agree that they themselves cannot afford the kinds of custom clothing that is celebrated on the show: 'RuPaul is coming from a place of immense privilege, experience and money and most queens who I know, myself included, cannot afford to buy custom made outfits and so these critiques… well, they make us feel like shit' (Participant 3), and 'we all buy things from *H&M* because we have to' (Participant 5). Therefore, *RPDR*, through its continuous idealisation of investment, 'forms a normative set of expectations, conditions, and categories to drag which in fact are not analogous to the history of drag performance' (Hopkins, 2004, 15).

Conversely, although most participants negatively critique these comments, the extent to which they critique them varies greatly. Some participants ridicule the show in stating that comments like these 'undermine everything drag is about and it shows that for RuPaul and its viewers money equals better

drag' (Participant 11). Yet, for other performers like Participants 1 and 15, the critical comments were somewhat justified since the commentary took place on *RPDR* and not in local scenes directly. Participant 1 states the following:

> I mean, you are going onto the best drag competition ever. You are going to need to elevate yourself and your drag. But in the case of Joe Black and the *H&M* dress debacle, honestly, I think the dress and the whole outfit needed to be elevated so much more for me. If you are coming to the Olympics of drag, then show up prepared. Be ready for it. Not in off the rack clothes (Participant 1).

Participant 3 echoes these statements: 'you're presenting nationwide to millions upon millions of people and you need to make sure that you are putting your best foot forward at all times'. Whilst these arguments are valid and justified by the global scale of the show, they inescapably reflect the ways in which drag publics like *RPDR* establish a standardised criteria that influence not only the stylistic choices drag performers make but increase the level of pressure placed on the self. When we consider the changing nature of the drag industry alongside the ways in which performers actively respond to that change and even justify the harsh critiques of *RPDR*, it highlights the strength of drag publics' industrial influence and enforces a 'perpetuation of marginalisation' for its communities (Zaslow, 2022, 5). Consequently, when we combine this 'with the very real financial crisis countless drag performers and artists find themselves in the thick of […] you have a complicated, capitalist, and classist conundrum' (Rasmussen, 2021) which bears direct impressions on local drag communities.

The pressure for local performers to invest in and stylistically adapt their drag does not only come from their own engagement with drag publics like *RPDR* since audience demands of local performers might also have been driven by influence from those very same drag publics. Given that for many newer and more heteronormative audiences' first engagement with drag could very likely have been through popular media content like *RPDR*, it can easily be suggested that they now expect this mainstream and culturally canonical standardisation of drag. This expected standard then has an immediate 'impact [on] drag performers at the local level, regardless of whether they have been (or want to be) on *RPDR* themselves' (Zaslow, 2022, 7). These notions are corroborated by Participant 3: 'I think a lot of people's only experience of drag is watching *Drag Race.* And they then come to see a drag show in person. And I think a lot of the time they hold on to these opinions and judgments that RuPaul and his judges have for the queens on *Drag Race* and bring these into the smaller drag communities. And I obviously don't like that'. Here, Participant 3 directly addresses how drag's mainstreaming through publics like *RPDR* and the shifting audiences it elicits, directly affect regional cultures of drag. This then highlights how through 'interfacing with a mainstream public' the counterpublics of drag (at regional and local levels) 'comes up against the very norms that, in its

subculture configuration, it sought to challenge' (Zaslow, 2022, 12). Participant 9's response appears to corroborate how drag publics have altered audience demands which are now enacted on local scenes:

> People now watch *Drag Race*, watch the kinds of drag on it and then go into the world taking that craziness with them and apply it to the local drag scenes. And they take the general elitist ideas of drag it perpetuates for local scenes and the wider world. That you have to have such a wide range of abilities and a lot of money and certain looks to do well and to be deemed as a good drag artist (Participant 9).

Audience's demands around local drag not only impact the stylistic qualities of local performers. Audiences not only expect local performers to match the expensive drag spectacularised by *RPDR*, but some audiences may also expect and even prefer to see celebrified ex-contestants of the franchise rather than local performers themselves: 'now people go to a drag show and expect to see a *Ru-Girl*' and 'it's getting to a point where people now want to see more than one *Ru-Girl* at a show, we [local performers] are seen as less than that' (Participant 1). This furthers the notion of quality and the differences between the elitist and celebrified figures and texts established through *RPDR* and its more lowly deemed and "amateurish" local counterparts. Additionally, the audience conditioning of expecting a standardised form of drag, does not only impact the operation of local drag performers through their work and stylistic choices but also influence their financial position. This is since there is a preference to see *Ru-Girls* and a potentially larger interest to book them for shows rather than performers in the local drag community, in Nottingham's already competitive market (which will be discussed in further detail later) where there are very few venues for queer-inclusive drag events to take place. Participant 2 reflects on how they believe they are perceived by changing audiences in their local drag scene in the following way: 'unfortunately … *Drag Race* … created an expectation from the audience so that they now expect a certain standard from queens, whether they're a local queen or a *Ru-Girl*. And so, everyone is put on the same pedestal whether you are a *Ru-Girl* or a local girl, but a lot of people don't consider local girls to be as polished as *Ru-Girls*'.

Conclusively, the shifting landscape of the UK drag industry has been further affected by global external factors like drag publics which hold influence over smaller and more localised cultures of drag in regional areas. In its changing of audience expectation, alongside the changes in audience diversity, these publics and their reach elicits pressures over drag performers, especially regarding the style, content, aesthetics, and self-funded financial investment of their work. Additionally, through the standardisations of expensive drag aesthetics and particular drag styles, drag publics like *RPDR* infiltrate the perceptions of audiences and performers alike in local counterpublic drag scenes, creating a newly formed set of pressures over local performers: 'by positioning drag on RPDR as the

unequivocal best, other forms of drag—specifically, those that happen outside the public realm—are viewed as second rate' (Zaslow, 2022, 16-7).

(iii) The Oversaturation of Local Drag Scenes

> And there's, I don't know, maybe a thousand new drag queens every few months here in the UK. And that's, unfortunately, too much. Our local scenes don't have the space or the money for that (Participant 9).

A theme that also prevalently appeared across interviews is the oversaturation of drag performers in local drag scenes due to the influence of drag media, which I have already posited as a form of drag public that establish dominant ideologies in the public sphere, to which counterpublics (like local drag scenes) respond to. This is said to have restricted job opportunities for local performers. While recent debates note the expansion of drag's visibility and popularity, this thesis examines the problems of this kind of mainstreaming: 'the publicising of drag has opened doors that expand both scope and reach of drag entertainers' (Zaslow, 6, 2022). These new forms of interest and engagement around drag and local drag performance scenes raise important questions around how drag's mainstreaming has created an influx of interest in not only consuming drag but also engaging more directly with it through performance and inserting oneself into the drag industry. This is reflected in participants' comments:

> And there's, I don't know, maybe a thousand new drag queens every few months here in the UK. And that's, unfortunately, too much. Our local scenes don't have the space or the money for that. This new emergence and interest in drag is definitely going to be regarded as a mainstream/pop culture trend and its things like *Drag Race* that are responsible. But for actual queer people and queer identities that have been around long before *Drag Race* and drag, it makes the wider world start to associate those identities with a trend with some pop culture fad. Drag is not a fad. And it's not a popular trend. And I would hate for that to get associated with these people who don't appreciate drag for its roots (Participant 9).

Participant 9 does not only address how the UK drag industry is being injected new flows of drag performers who have been inspired by *RPDR*, but also reflect on how these surges in performer numbers have in ways began to oversaturate an already competitive market in regional drag communities. This has direct financial implications for drag performers and their work.

Before examining the saturation of local drag economies and how this affects the opportunities performers have, I will address how some performers' motivations for initial engagement with forms of drag is directly influenced by *RPDR.* This exploration relies on my interviews where performers were

asked about their initial motivations for engaging with drag. There are two factors that refer to performers' motivation for their direct engagement in local drag communities that are relevant to this discussion, and they are: *RPDR* itself, and the possibility of economic profit alongside potentials for fame/celebrity. These motivations I argue are related to these new industry-related influxes which are becoming detrimental to the financial success of local performers by increasing competition within the city.

Six of the fifteen Nottingham-based performers identified *RPDR* as the leading factor that led them to their current career in drag: 'I was a performer from a young age [...] but then I started watching *Drag Race* and I had finally found what I was looking for' (Participant 2), and 'the first time I ever saw someone that reminded me of a drag queen was of course Michelle Visage and I followed her career which led me to *Drag Race* and the rest is history for me and drag' (Participant 5). It becomes evident through these examples that the reality television show has not only propelled drag into the world of mainstream media, but because of that globalisation more performers are seeking to take part in drag within local communities. It appears that this cultivation of drag performers commonly occurs because when consuming *RPDR*, in many cases, it is the first time an individual accesses a form of drag due to the heightened visibility and accessibility that the show generates. Additionally, consuming drag performance in this way gives its audience a visual guideline that they might work to achieve and tweak, to create their own drag persona and therefore the show stimulates creative thought:

> *Drag Race* was my motivation for sure. For me drag is mostly about the illusion of looking like a woman and Trinity the Tuck? That's a woman. I am super envious of her but absolutely adore her. [...] It is the same thing. Adoration. And when you're watching a drag show, you're literally just taken out of the world for like five minutes because you are so mesmerised by this gorgeous glamazon. And also there's probably a story going on as well. You can escape reality (Participant 7).

In addition to noting that they themselves were motivated by the show, Participants 6 and 11 comment on how this motivation is perhaps widespread amongst performers. They share how others have been enticed into the world of drag through its mainstreaming: 'I started doing it really at a time when everyone started doing it and that was off the back of *Drag Race*. Everyone was all of a sudden thinking that they could become a drag queen overnight and that I guess [was] the key thing that motivated me to do it' (Participant 6), and 'like every other person these days, I watched *Drag Race* and was like, my God I could do that. I want to do that' (Participant 11). Thus, these examples give a sense of overcrowding within local drag markets.

The final motivation identified across the dataset which is tied to the commercialisation of drag through drag publics, is profit and the potential for drag performance to become an occupational opportunity. Five Nottingham-based participants discussed this motivation for their personal involvement with local drag, although it should be mentioned that this usually was a contributing motivation and not framed as the dominant reason for beginning a drag career. Despite this, performers believed that through creating drag personas and entering into local drag scenes, they could occupationally benefit from: 'money was a massive motivation for me. I was a poor student, and I could get paid to go out on a night out with a bit of makeup on like, yeah, it worked for me and paid my bills' (Participant 8), and 'I realised when I went to a couple of drag shows for the first time after watching *Drag Race*, that obviously people were paying to get in and I realised then and there that this could be such a profitable thing. I could create art and have fun and people would pay to come and see it. That was when I realised the scope of what I could potentially do with drag and how it could benefit me' (Participant 9).

Two participants define more clearly how their intentions of performing drag were significantly dependent on the return of profit for their artistic work: 'you need a lot of money to do drag, so if I was going to ever do it then I needed to be sure I could make money from it (Participant 13), 'I have always thought of drag like this: this is business and as an individual I have bills to pay just the same as everyone else. Drag has to help me with that for me to even think about doing it' (Participant 15). I argue that the globalisation of drag through drag publics has potentially informed these motivations for local performers. Drag and their local scenes 'have transformed into spaces of and for commercial enterprise' and the public *RPDR* have driven these transformations through the ideologies they perpetuate (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 387). One of the ways in which it has directed this shift is by stressing the importance of hard work to becoming successful and showing that success is usually gauged by profit and popularity. Thus, performers are encouraged to enter two interwoven neoliberal economies: the financial and the social. The show regularly makes use of the term 'werk'[28] which is a term used transnationally by LGBTQIA+ communities. It is this emphasis on an 'imperative to work' that places a 'discursive insistence on professionalism and hard work' and to deliver results of a high calibre which is consumed by drag performers and audiences alike (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 395-6). This is far removed from forms of earlier drag which was 'less professional and more political' and which has since been 'eclipsed by the genre's mainstream success' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 395-6). It is then understandable that links between occupational status and drag performance might be drawn by those seeking to create drag and enter local scenes to profit from their work: for many

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[28] The term '*Werk*' is used globally by LGBTQIA+ communities, originating in the USA, loosely refers to doing something to an exceptional standard.

performers and as highlighted by *RPDR* 'drag is not a hobby, it's a career' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 396).

The commercialised progression of pre-*RPDR* performers to post-show *Ru-Girls*/celebrities is yet another way that *RPDR* enforces the possibility of financial benefit for local performers. This is most clearly articulated by Participant 5 who details that the ex-contestant Victoria Scone showed them how they could also take their drag from low-profit to high-profit and have it become a successful career: 'she is proof that you can go from something very little and where you don't really earn very much money, to being so much better off and having tv guest slots, appearing in global shows, headlining acts. There is money to make in drag'. The show 'presents drag as a viable career option' and 'financial opportunity' (Westerling, 2020, 34) for contestants, especially highlighted through its 'celebrification of the show's drag queens' framing drag as a lucrative occupation (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 397). Whilst I will argue later in this chapter that local drag is rarely lucrative, drag publics idealise the financial benefit of drag occupations and therefore inspire individuals to pursue it as a career ideal.

The two motivations identified above for the recent influxes of new performers and their link to the influence of drag publics give some indication as to why the drag performer market in local scenes has become oversaturated. This is especially relevant when taking into consideration the discussions from the last chapter, as already in Nottingham there are so few queer venues that house performances despite the velocity of local drag's growth in the city. This oversaturation conjures new financial concerns over the performers' career opportunities. Participant 1, for example, states that 'Nottingham is pretty small, and it's small enough as it is without all of the kids that are starting drag now [...] this should never be a bad thing, drag is for everyone. It's just that it squeezes us so much moneywise. It's almost like there isn't actually enough room for us all'.

(iv) Balancing The Argument: Globalisation and Reinvigoration

> *RuPaul's Drag Race* kind of made [drag] commercially viable, and in a business sense you can argue that we needed that (Participant 1).

It is becoming more evident that drag's global public influence has drastically altered the foundations of the UK drag industry at both national and local levels. Whilst this chapter thus far has been critical of these changes, it is important to consider some of the ways that the globalisation enforced through *RPDR* have beneficially altered the UK drag performance industry.

RPDR has thrust drag into the mainstream cultural arena, increasing its popularity as an art form. It has done so by heightening both the visibility of and accessibility to the once-taboo form of drag which in turn encourages more liberal attitudes of acceptance around queerness: 'contrasting with the once-marginal position of drag queens in LGBT cultures,' they now have even 'gained celebrity status' (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 15). Therefore, the subversive potential of drag (regardless of how this is partially dampened) is potentially reinforced through its mainstreaming since it helps to work towards 'a more inclusive social zeitgeist' (Hopkins, 2004, 1). The overarchingly clear example of this is the increased popularity of drag and these new surges of interest, as Participant 1 states, provide new opportunities for performers: '*RuPaul's Drag Race* kind of made drag commercially viable, and in a business sense you can argue that we very much needed that [...] drag is more popular than ever before'. As mentioned earlier, this subversive potential can also be argued to have developed further by enhanced financial and occupational qualities for performers: 'mainstream drag provides an avenue for queer performers to thrive where other cultural arenas remain heteronormative' (McCormack and Wignall, 2022, 15).

Whilst this global reinvigoration of drag can in many ways be deemed as beneficial, there remains an overwhelming number of shifts in the industry that have altered local drag landscapes in a way that hinders its associated performers. These claims are not only widespread in academic debates, but also proliferate through the lives of local performers within the drag industry – as evidenced by the participants' experiences this chapter showcases. Through (i) weakening of drag's subcultural and subversive roots, (ii) placing unprecedented pressures and expectations onto performers, and (iii) limiting opportunity by indirectly encouraging the oversaturation of local drag economies, the drag public has broken down and re-shaped the UK drag industry.

5.2) Contrast Between Drag Publics and Counterpublics: Issues Around Performance Opportunity

I have already argued in this chapter that public interest in the culturally canonical *RPDR* has led to an oversaturation of local drag performer markets, therefore hindering access to financial and occupational opportunities for local performers. This should be considered alongside discussions in Chapter 4 in which I explored the city of Nottingham's lack of queer venues. I explore how they jointly create new financial constraints on local performers through a regional shortage of opportunities for drag jobs and bookings. I argue that due to the factors detailed in this chapter, local performers have been placed in a precarious position where it is increasingly difficult to both showcase their drag *and* be paid fairly for it. The regional specificities of this financial and occupational positioning entrench

their subordination to the dominating drag public *RPDR*. These discussions anticipate the following chapter where I will assess notions of self-branding and the professionalising of local drag work to survive in this unprecedented and precarious financial landscape which encourages drag through popularity and demand but does not seem to return the performers providing the *supply* of drag with adequate financial reward.

Discussions of an overall lack of opportunity permeate nearly all participant interviews carried out for this project, with all 15 performers repeatedly indicating that they are dissatisfied with the lack of opportunity despite the influx of new audiences: 'opportunity-wise, like I said, it's so incredibly minimalistic. I do wish there was more, but that's just the way it is here' (Participant 2), and 'I think compared to a decade ago, there's definitely more opportunities now, but with that being said there is still nowhere near enough in Nottingham to say how popular drag is here' (Participant 6). Despite the ongoing globalisation of drag and its transnational popularity which creates high demand, performers in local scenes do not reap these benefits that are found in the wider drag industry. These counterpublics then remain subordinate to their widely acclaimed counterparts (*RPDR)*. It has already been established that respondents have in numerous ways detailed the high expense of drag, and that whilst they are intent on upkeeping this self-funded investment on their drag aesthetics, many regarded financial return as crucial to their ongoing drag career. Participant 3 comments on how it has taken them three years of work within the local drag scene to begin seeing some return on their initial investment: 'In all honesty it's taken me literally three years to get to this point now, where I really feel like my career is at the point where it is starting to properly take off. And for the first time, I am earning enough money that I can pay for the costumes, wigs and all that other shit that I always bought anyway. I had to do that though. Otherwise, I would never have got here in Nottingham' (Participant 3). This underscores how common the occurrence of non-return on investment is for local drag performers in Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan scene.

Some participants attribute this lack of opportunity for performance to the lack of queer spaces that was explored in Chapter 4: 'it's very few and far between to get the opportunity to perform or even go to any kind of LGBTQ plus events. It's very rare that I would do kind of like a full week of gigs. You are lucky if you get a couple since there isn't anywhere to go' (Participant 2) and 'there are very little opportunities for when you're starting, especially if you don't know Nottingham […] having to find places that will support you to do a performance is quite difficult here' (Participant 5). In addition to the lack of performance venues that could facilitate performance, and therefore increase the number of opportunities for local performers to enact drag and be paid for it, participants explained how there is a lack of residency opportunities in the heteronormative venues that *do* facilitate drag performance in Nottingham. Participant 7 notes how Nottingham's drag scene does not have many drag residency

positions: '[Nottingham] doesn't really have any residencies for drag, there are only a couple of examples of that and even for those people that residency is unreliable […] and there is now so many of us to compete against'. This means that for performers in Nottingham, the possibility of contractual employment through drag is reduced drastically. Instead, performers seek temporary employment by being booked for individual gigs and events. Yet, as Participant 7 argues, this means that performers must compete against each other for those drag-based financial opportunities. This notion of competition is reinforced by the comments of Participant 11 who feels that drag residency spots that can be found are already occupied by performers who have been longstanding pillars of the drag scene:

> And there are already people who've taken up all the spots. I think of myself as being one of them at the time, like, if you look to [drag performer name A], for example, where she would host several *Ru-Girls*, it was mostly me and a few of the local girls that were getting the bookings and getting the gigs. But if I am realistic, I don't have a residency here. The queens that do have residencies here have been around Nottingham for years, for far longer than we have. Whereas a few of the newer qeens aren't getting booked and we aren't able to have that same opportunity. Everyone wants to do drag and make money from it at the same time. And there's just not enough space for everyone (Participant 11).

The evident lack of drag-based occupational positions in Nottingham, both temporary and permanent, has therefore encouraged (or rather forced) performers to create opportunities for themselves that did not exist previously. Examples of this were provided by ten of the fifteen Nottingham-based participants, who in some way revealed how the local drag scene and its low prospects around job security has pushed them and their counterparts to attempt to create independently sought and curated financial opportunities: 'in Nottingham we as drag artists have to either sit and hope for a job that doesn't and won't exist, or we go out and have to get it for ourselves' (Participant 10) and 'to get paid in Nottingham for drag you have to constantly put yourself forward for things, and constantly seek it, and constantly create it' (Participant 6). This is reportedly obtained through the creation of independent events: 'I had to create my own drag shows though otherwise I wouldn't have had the opportunities I have made' (Participant 1) and 'a lot of the shows that I've done, a lot of my opportunities have been through me creating them myself and basically begging for someone to say yes' (Participant 9). It is worthy of note that, in addition to the self-curation involved, these events are usually self-funded as Participant 9 details: 'I have done a lot of work where it has been down to my funds to actually put on events in venues'. This is confirmed by the experiences of Participant 3 who states that their lack of funds has stopped them from performing drag or creating more of these events: 'quite a lot of the things I have done and put on in drag have been self-made and self-funded but the thing is that it's hard to do that. I don't earn a lot in Nottingham and so even though I will

make that money back I don't have a lot of it to put into starting events. So, I have only done a few'. Therefore, not only do local performers have to invest in the aesthetic features of their drag, they also need to financially invest through creating opportunities for performance (for both themselves and others in the community) by creating events in the local night-time economy. It is this 'doctrine of entrepreneurship' which is 'reflective of how all manner of human activity has been increasingly brought into the realm of the market' and how local drag performers are forced to engage in this culture of entrepreneurialism for their drag to survive (Buck, 2019, 6). Whilst this idealised neoliberal entrepreneurialism 'suggests that anyone can potentially become an entrepreneur and thrive' and therefore 'the notion of achieving individual wealth appears less rarefied' (Buck, 2019, 7), in these cases the performers are victims of these ideals through their lack of financial return. This is highlighted by Participant 3 who says: 'I have had to compromise with my own events because they don't end up making me a lot of money even though they are really popular, so we have actually ended up doing a couple of online events – that way it's free'.

This insistence on investment is also interesting when considered alongside the occupational status of the participants from this project. Out of fifteen participants, only two performers were full-time drag performers. The other thirteen participants, in addition to regarding themselves as part-time drag performers, also had at least one other job for financial stability. This is a common occurrence in drag settings. Berkowitz and Belgrave describe how their participants have 'multiple jobs' because 'drag just don't pay the bills' (2010, 160). This will be explored more thoroughly in the later sections of this chapter. And even though several performers indicate their wish to perform drag as a full-time occupation, the scene does not provide the financial stability for it: 'financially, can the average drag queen make a career out of drag in Nottingham? No, probably not. There isn't enough money here' (Participant 5).

These notions of self-investment are elicited by the current state of Nottingham's local queer scene, where demand for drag performance is high but due to (i) the oversaturation of local drag performers, and (ii) the lack of physical event locations to house such performances, opportunities are limited, which risks the performers' financial stability. Therefore, one might argue that regardless of newly founded interest and popularity in the wider UK drag industry, local performance scenes once again exist 'outside of the cultural conditions that might have enabled and supported the development of professional careers' and have an 'ambivalent relationship to capitalism' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 390).[29] Counterpublics of drag, under constant pressure from the globalised and standardised images

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[29] The effects of self-investment and the lack of performance opportunity will be explored in more depth in the following chapter (6).

that drag publics like *RPDR* culturally establish, seek to benefit from the visibility and popularity it has provided the form of drag with. Its newly formed and widespread audiences provide the prospect of opportunity through their demand for drag. However, through the financial differentiation between the performer communities engaging in those two publics, counterpublics become severely disadvantaged and struggle to successfully reproduce the mainstreamed image of drag that is culturally maintained and conjured through *RPDR* and its continued success. Stylistically, performers adapt their work to meet the standardisations that the drag public sets. This reflects Warner's discussions on counterpublics: for disadvantaged counterpublics like local drag scenes to succeed, they must learn to 'adapt themselves to the performatives of rational critical discourse' that their dominating public determines (2002, 89).

5.3) Conclusions

This chapter establishes that the wider UK drag industry has altered drastically, being re-shaped to fit the standardisation enforced by the drag public *RPDR* and the ongoing globalisation of drag. This renegotiation of the industry, I have argued, has relied on the commodification of drag that its globalisation has elicited. The chapter has isolated contributing factors that established these changes and have significantly enforced correlating shifts in performers' artistic operation and mentality (through their shift in social and occupational logic that reflects and speaks to neoliberal ideals of individualism and competition within local labour markets).

As a result, performers at the local level are forced to (i) reconsider the artistic integrity and style of their work, (ii) succumb to financial pressures conjured by the costly drag that *RPDR* represents, and (iii) become competitive in overcrowded local markets due to new influxes of performers that media like *RPDR* have inspired. In these ways, their very operation has changed, adapting to the new needs of the global market. Despite the beneficial promise of global and local interest/demand that *RPDR's* success has accumulated, counterpublics of drag (local drag scenes/communities) remain subordinate to it. Whilst these counterpublics are increasingly steered by the industrial shifts that this drag public catalyses, little return is provided, entrenching their own subordination to their more dominant drag public *RPDR*.

Furthermore, in their insistence to conform to public expectation (established through the prominence of the drag public) local drag performers replicate mainstream forms of drag and by extension become involved in its commoditisation. They appropriate these mainstream forms and supply them to more local/regional audiences (albeit with lower budgets and less performance

opportunities) echoing characteristics of neoliberal glocalisation. Further separating local drag scene's counterpublics from their more "successful" media-based counterpart is the lack of opportunity awarded to them. Opportunities are scarce due to not only the financial and geographical state of their local night-time economy[30] but also the oversaturation of local drag performer markets that *RPDR* has catalysed.

This focus will be built upon in the following chapter which isolates how local performers' personal lives both in and outside of their work are influenced by the altered drag industry they are surrounded by, which inherits globalised standards of drag through the dominance of *RPDR.*

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[30] As argued in the previous chapter (4).

Chapter 6
Neoliberal Infiltration of The Personal, Financial, and Occupational

The previous chapter explored the changing terrain of the drag industry and its consequent re-rooting of performers in its newly shaped landscape, claiming that this restructuring has been constructed through the influence of the drag public *RPDR* and Nottingham's local specificity. This chapter develops this discussion by considering how a newly consolidated need for performers to adapt the operation of their drag has been directly introduced *through* these socio-industrial shifts. This is contemplated through examinations of internalised neoliberal tendencies and attitudes as illuminated by performers' efforts to build and promote their independent self-brands (6.1). I claim that these efforts are highlighted through multiple facets of their daily operation in drag including their (i) drag personae and building market knowledge, (ii) personal investment, (iii) development of transferable skills, (iv) multiple streams of business, (v) use of networking as a business tool.

The following section (6.2) considers how these new attitudes to drag, and its changed industrial scene produces direct effects on the personal lives of these performers, outside of their work. It suggests that neoliberal ideology has not only infiltrated the local scenes of performers, the drag industry itself more generally, and the ways in which they operate *within* that scene, but it has also parasitically penetrated aspects of their social and personal lives *outside* of drag. The most notable feature of this being the blurred lines between the personal, the occupational, and the social aspects of drag performers' lives. Discussions begin by interrogating the infiltration of competition into local performer communities, and its effect on relationships within that community (6.21). These discussions explore (6.22) local performers' issues around (i) identity conflation, (ii) dating and building relationships, (iii) resistance, homophobia, and other forms of violence, (iv) financial stability, and (v) impact on mental health. Following this, the discussions will be furthered through comparisons between interview data from Nottingham and Manchester-based respondents (6.3). The chapter will conclude with a consideration of how drag performers are perhaps more susceptible to the kinds of neoliberal infiltration and influence discussed earlier, due to the complex nature of drag and its already inherent interweaving of identities (the everyday-lived self and the drag self) (6.4).

6.1) Self-As-Brand and Promotion of The Self

Self-branding is a term widely theorised and often associated with the ideologies of neoliberalism and forms of late capitalism. The self is a concept used frequently across academic fields of research, with varying discussions on how to define it. For this study, the self will refer 'to subjectivity and identity,

our individuality' as per McGuigan's definition (2014, 231). The term self-branding refers to when 'individuals think of themselves as products to be marketed to a broad audience in the hopes of becoming more economically competitive' (Whitmer, 2019, 1). Discourse surrounding the term suggests that self-branding 'directs self-presentation in a very specific, instrumental way, requiring constant self-reflection and evaluation in constructing a strong brand' for the self (Whitmer, 2019, 1). The commercialisation of the self, encouraged through neoliberal ideals, manifests itself clearly in the motivations and operations of local drag performers, who, I argue, 'take responsibility for themselves by taking an entrepreneurial approach to the self' and establish themselves as 'products to be marketed as a means of managing the risks of an unstable labour market' (Whitmer, 2019, 1). Whilst the global drag industry has arguably encouraged self-branding, I believe that local performers in more regional settings are pushed into replicating these characteristics in their limited markets due to how their surrounding drag economy fails to financially support and reward them. All fifteen Nottingham based performers exhibit several different characteristics of their own self-branding repeatedly during this study.

(i)   Drag Personae and Building Market Knowledge

The first category through which performers represent an internalised branding of the self in relation to their drag work is through the initial creation, continued development, and promotion of their individual drag persona. This and the importance of participants' local market knowledge, informs how their individualised persona is marketed for a local reputation to be built. This category of self-branding has been evidenced by all participants interviewed for this study. The term drag persona can be understood as a kind of temporary character that is "put on" and embodied, which helps performers to 'distinguish between their real or core identities' in creating a 'drag identity' (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 179) that is separated from the personal self. Drag personas are usually signified by a separate name to the individuals' everyday lived name, reflecting a form of transformation. This process of character formation through a drag persona is discussed by Berkowitz and Belgrave: 'the embodied labour of transforming the self into the character occurs concurrently with the identity work of separating the drag persona from other identities. During this metamorphosis, participants literally change into a character, into their drag persona.' (2010, 179). Yet, the interview reflections from this project not only suggest how drag personae are used to separate the personal lives of participants from their occupational ones but are also positioned as a brand to be marketed. And since drag performer personae usually are, in some way, bound with the identity of the individual, drag performers submit themselves to neoliberal notions of branding the self. These personae brands are

constructed through intense work on the aesthetic, style, and even attitude of a drag character that should remain constant when the performer is in drag. This upkeep of the individualised drag brand then becomes a commodifiable product that can be marketed and is carefully edited and curated for greater appeal in local markets.

Several of the participants refer to their 'drag aesthetic' which they have 'created over time': 'I always wanted to be the high-end princess of Nottingham and that's what I made' (Participant 2). This is also discussed by Participant 3 who details how their drag aesthetic was carefully curated to appeal to local markets:

> My drag aesthetic is very kitschy cute camp. But then in a lot of the makeup and stuff, there's a lot of like alien influences. A lot of influences from vintage fashion, which, like, I absolutely love. I find that that kind of style works very well in Nottingham. The cute camp is different from a lot of the queens that are already performing here, and I like that. Especially with that alien vibe. I mean I also get booked so it must work. It took me a long time to figure out what works here but I finally figured it out and kind of mashed it up with my own ideas…. But then also I like to endorse and think about body positivity and body confidence as well (Participant 3).

This performer articulates how they have tailored their very specific drag aesthetic to not only be the product of their own artistic expression but also a reflection of the expectations that exist within local public audiences. Aware of local audiences' expectations Participant 3 tailors their drag to those same expectations to become successful in their local market. In this way, one might argue that drag within particular environs becomes a type of 'homogenous product' (Buck, 2017, 6) since the artistic expression of the performer is solidified in their drag persona, yet the artistic vision of the persona is guided in effect by market forces; by audience expectation and the availability of a niche into which their marketable difference in the local drag scene can establish. This necessary artistic flexibility of the individual reflects the idealised neoliberal self in which the individual is open to a 'recasting of identity in terms of flexibility, adaptability and instant transformation' (McGuigan, 2014, 232). Their own artistic integrity is then displaced by consumer expectation/demand.

The importance of differentiating oneself in the local scene demonstrates how performers are compelled to market themselves in ways that evoke notions of competition. Local performers' proactive efforts to establish a unique selling proposition, related to their drag performances within their local market, positions their fellow performers as rivals. These competitive notions reflect how self-branding and: 'neoliberal ideologies have long embraced entrepreneurship as … a means into an ever more fiercely competitive labour market' (Buck, 2017, 6). Participant 1 directly reflects on the importance of this: 'I like to look like an overgrown plastic doll which is kind of opposite to what all

the drag queens are doing here as they are making themselves… Everyone in Nottingham is you know ultra-feminine and sleek and that's how I stand out visually and audiences love the grandeur of that aesthetic'. The participant shares how their drag aesthetic has been tailored not only to suit the taste of local audiences, increasing the likelihood of its prominence in the local market, but also to separate them from their peers. It should be noted that fourteen of the fifteen local performers interviewed suggested that their drag aesthetic contributed to their point of difference in local drag markets. Whilst *RPDR* and the wider UK drag industry already encourage this need for entrepreneurialism, the competitive nature of Nottingham's scene (through the oversaturation of performers in its local drag market that already provides scarce performance opportunities) should be considered as a factor contributing to these practices of self-branding. This is since it propels performers to find ways to economically survive within their changed industrial surroundings and in this way neoliberalism and its ideal of self-entrepreneurialism 'is not only economic policy and hard-nosed politics but it actually frames the meaning of everyday reality for people' (McGuigan, 2014, 225). The awareness of this neoliberal commercialised self in establishing a marketable individuality in their drag personas is evidenced most clearly in the regular occurrence of the term 'USP' across the dataset.

The acronym USP is defined as: 'unique selling point/proposition: a feature of a product that makes it different from and better than other similar products and that can be emphasised in advertisements for the product' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023) and is usually utilised in marketing and corporate business sectors where the commerciality of a product underlies decision making. Five performers made regular use of this term, always in relation to their drag persona and their position in the local drag market. However, this discussion will consider the statements made by Participant 8 specifically. The regular use of such business-centric language further implies the commercialisation of the self, or at the least an internalisation of some of its principles, in local drag performers that I have identified in local scenes in this chapter. It also demonstrates a process of thought whereby the individual becomes a self-identified, and therefore internalised, product of commercialism.

Participant 8 states that:

> You hope that someone will recognise your work and recognise what your USP is. That's your value. Whether that is a body shape or a makeup look, your talent, or your personality. Your brand in drag is set around a point of interest that differentiates you from others, right? And it's something you just need to build upon and improve. Because that is the only thing that can get you opportunity here in Nottingham. It's hard for us all but need to make sure that people choose me to perform over someone else (Participant 8).

The performer reveals several important points of focus related to self-branding through the presence of a drag persona that I wish to address here. Firstly, the performer further illuminates how a USP

provides them with a competitive stance in the local drag market. Furthermore, they place this kind of importance over the needs of their community counterparts by positioning their need for occupational security above that of their peers'. This begins to reflect how individuals in artistic and creative professions in the neoliberal era are subjected to 'uncertainty' and 'unpredictability' in localised financial markets and therefore must 'fashion the kind of self that can cope' with the ongoing competition within their occupational market (McGuigan, 2014, 236). In this way, the individual highlights a justified sense of "selfishness" through their desperation to succeed in such restrictive conditions since they place their own success above the needs of their counterparts:

> This kind of self is a neoliberal self, figuring a competitive individual who is exceptionally self-reliant and rather indifferent to the fact that his or her predicament is shared with others – and, therefore, incapable of organising as a group to do anything about it. Such a person must be 'cool' in the circumstances, selfishly resourceful and fit in order to survive under social-Darwinian conditions. Many simply fall by the wayside, exterminated by the croak-voiced Daleks of neoliberalism (McGuigan, 2014, 236).

Secondly, the performer notes how their USP, or persona brand, is subject to near-constant reflection and review in their recognition of the need for self-development to keep their brand/product appealing to local audiences and grow their popularity. Not only are they under burdens of individualisation in competitive markets, but they also create new sets of pressures around their drag personas around the need for brand improvement. In this way the performer echoes discussions of neoliberal 'self-help' and self-improvement where the individuals place themselves under near-constant scrutiny so that their 'voluntary enterprise' highlights the individual potential to 'change, transform, or improve the self' for greater success (Nguyen, 2017, 38). Therefore, it stands to reason that the more time performers dedicate (alongside their substantial financial investments), the stronger their desire for a return on those investments. Consequently, performers articulate the need for flexibility in their work and product, drawing sharp parallels with how capitalist global corporations consistently produce and re-invent, product and marketing material. One more important note is that nine of the participants interviewed revealed that they feel like their drag persona had somewhat improved since their initial engagement with the art form. One, for example, laughingly said, 'oh, it was terrible, when I started it was like watching Bambi in drag slipping around in high heels and a face that was – well let's not get into that' (Participant 1). All nine reflected in some way on their initial aesthetic and style that launched them into their drag career in overtly negative ways viewing the past self as one of an amateurish quality, but also as a foundation upon which they built. Thus, participants not only evidence how reflexivity and improvement continue to inform their artistic decision-making within drag, but also how it has previously altered the very nature of the drag that they now showcase.

When discussing the individuality that increases their likelihood of success and a growing local reputation, performers also describe how they seek out and develop their knowledge of the local drag scene and the types of performers that construct it. I argue that this kind of scouting replicates the act of conducting market research, a type of business-centric research (often undertaken semi-consciously) which includes the 'gathering and studying of data relating to consumer preferences [and] purchasing power' and establishes knowledge on competitors and their place in the same market (Collins Dictionary, 2023). Whilst participants do not directly refer to this kind of consumer/market research, there are inferences made during some discussions on the individual's USP/drag persona and how it relates to the market around them. Participant 12 states that 'the scene here is full of people who have fully developed their own character and really worked hard to create their own drag persona and have done an incredible job of it […] it's like building a character to sell and so I have to do the same but make mine different enough'. The performer therefore highlights how through their developing knowledge of other performers and their styles of drag, they can tailor the characteristics of their personal brand to distinguish them as an individual in local markets. Thereby, the performer informs the creation of their marketable niche within the scene, thereby raising their market worth. This kind of tailoring and increasing of market worthiness once again exemplifies the internalisation of local performer self-branding as the 'worker whose personal brand does not resonate simply is not presenting the right kind of self, or not doing so in the right way' and thus it must be informed by the market it situates itself in to be competitive within those same markets (Whitmer, 2019, 7).

Additionally, performers articulate how they are aware of not only competing brands through this research, but also how their audiences receive and react to their brand and its marketing: 'I've taken a lot of time to study, to a certain extent, what people appreciate visually when I go on stage […] you learn that from watching others […] so I've worked on an aesthetic that I would quite comfortably bring to every venue that I travelled to around the UK, to make sure that the audience that I perform to are always visually pleased' (Participant 15). Therefore, local performers' market research helps to position the worth of their work in local markets through not only assessing their competitors, but also informing the aesthetic of their work and tailor it for mass consumption.

Whilst the above examples demonstrate performers' awareness of the need for individualism in the face of competition, some performers have acknowledged and even embraced the competitive environment fostered by neoliberalism within the community, seeing potential benefits in it.

> There is a lot of competition for spots here because there is so many for us. I think competition is a healthy thing. I don't necessarily know if everybody agrees with that. But I think it should be something that pushes somebody to do more. So, if there is competition there it means

that what I do that makes me stand out, and then I have a USP. And there's always going to be competition in these things, you know, there's limited spaces and there's limited outlets. And ultimately, there's always going to be somebody who's more established and better at doing what you do. So, you've got to keep that in mind. But that should just be something that's used to motivate yourself. I think in Nottingham, for the most part, it's a healthy competition, no one's trying to outdo each other, no one's trying to slander somebody else's name or say that I'm better than anyone else. I think that that's a good thing. It means that people can go around and do what they do with a certain level of integrity. And I'm all for people behaving with a certain level of grace and decorum. Friendly competition encourages that. And, you know, that's just going to make everyone a better performer at the end of the day, or a better drag queen, because they're going to push themselves. The best of us are the ones that learn, and we are the ones that get booked (Participant 4).

This example is anomalous in the overarching interview dataset and contradicts almost all discussion on competition within the local drag scene from other participants. After all, performers have openly discussed that the competitive nature of the local drag market is difficult to navigate and places a financial strain on them so much so that they have to work multiple jobs and struggle, as it is a rarity for people to obtain, and keep, a full time drag occupation. Yet, this example highlights neoliberalism's ideological capacity to infiltrate and re-shape individual perception and potentially an individual's moral insight. This is not a critique of the performer, more an observation of how their words reflect potentially harmful (to the industry financially and socially) neoliberal ideals. The performer argues that the competition created through Nottingham's smaller landscape for opportunity, leads to the self-improvement of performers and this notion of working harder is what allows this. They even go as far to draw a type of success hierarchy between successful performers who they claim to be harder working and competitively engage within the market, and those who do not work as hard and are therefore less successful. Here Participant 4 highlights how within neoliberalism's boundaries, performers are 'autonomous and self-calculating' and 'must bear the responsibility for their lives no matter the constraints of poverty, racism, sexism, and so on' (Buck, 2017, 2). The neoliberal self is viewed to be rewarded within competitive markets such as these due to the high importance that they place on individualism (in this case working to improve and solidify their USP). The participant endorses neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurialism since they propose 'that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximisation of entrepreneurial freedoms' (Harvey, 2007, 22). This is undertaken by the individual to cement their position in social and financial hierarchies in the local drag market, regardless of how it undermines the minoritised individuals seen as competitors: 'competition rewards individualism, elevating that actor who dispenses with cultural constraints or social bonds to achieve economic advantage' (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2002, 114).

(ii)   Personal Investment

The second category of performer self-branding methods to be discussed in this chapter is that of personal investment made by individual performers in their drag. This has been briefly discussed previously, but this section seeks to address these investments as methods of self-branding and discuss in turn the financial risk this poses to performers within a financially barren scene.

My participants refer overwhelmingly to their high-level of financial outlay to increase the quality, diversity, and appeal of their drag for audiences. This is often related to the pressure of audience expectations alongsise the reinvention and constant development that is key to the commodification of the self, detailed earlier in the chapter: 'People don't want to see you in the same thing all the time, you can get away with the same hair. If you don't wear different dress, people will go off you' (Participant 1) and 'everyone expects new looks all the time and they expect spectacular new hair, shoes, etc. Like there's so much that you have to buy for drag just to kind of begin to push yourself further into the industry.' (Participant 2). The high amounts that performers invest into their work and drag aesthetics specifically, is done to raise their appeal to audiences and simultaneously increase their position in the reputation economy and build market worth[31]. Yet, as we have already discussed, the local lesser-metropolitan economy does not financially reward performers highly in most cases. According to several participants, they themselves and their community-based colleagues do not obtain (and have not yet obtained in their careers, despite some having been in the community for several years) adequate financial return on their drag investment:

> Most of mine still hasn't even been close to being earnt back. I have nowhere near earned back what I have spent. Because like, the wigs I use at the minute are real human hair units. And that new one cost me like £525. I have an outfit with ostrich feathers that cost me £670. Another outfit cost me £650. I am having another one custom made for Halloween and that was £365. And that is just outfits and hair. It doesn't include, like, shoes, because my boots cost me, like, £60-£100 a pair. Then you've got jewellery and jewellery can be quite expensive too, depending on where you get it from. Makeup in itself is also expensive. Yeah. So, like, like, my foundation is £17 a stick, and I use three different shades on my face. So that's £60 before you've even gone into eyeshadow palettes and everything like that (Participant 2).

The precarity of financial loss is easy for performers to fall into, Participant 1 notes their past spending habits and their need to change them: 'I will buy newer stuff now when I need to, but I definitely try to limit the amount I am spending and try not to treat myself too much. I used to be really bad, spending a lot on clothes and stuff for drag and it took me so long to gain that money back. I mean, I

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[31] This reflects ideas around the 'wealth effect', a neoliberal concept that determines how the value of wealth is related to consumer spending and infers that the way to make money is to spend it, potentially through continued investment (Lettau and Ludvigson, 2004).

still don't know whether I got it all back' (Participant 1). Here the performer detail the threats that the cost of self-investment poses to their own finances. Yet, by using the term 'treat', they also frame this investment as both rewarding personally and as form of work expenditure.

Whilst this will be dealt with in more depth later, participants do share how they seek to make this investment more financially viable by reducing their costs: 'there's definitely a way of navigating spending less and the main one is learning to sew. I mean fabric is still expensive to make, like my last outfit in terms of cost, the fabric was only £65 and then actually having it made was £300. So, like, if I could sew it, that outfit would have only cost me £65 and then a few hours labour' (Participant 2). Here the performer becomes business-centrically interested in how to increase their profit margins and therefore directly parallels business ventures and highlights performers' internalisation of the need to self-brand. Additionally, the performer becomes self-reliant as a neoliberal self, who takes responsibility for their monetary success and is forced to take on a commercial identity to make a profit. This is since neoliberalism has increasingly constructed 'individual subjects into entrepreneurial actors who are autonomous and self-calculating' and are responsible for their own financial success given the 'supposed liberatory qualities of entrepreneurism through its competitive format' (Buck, 2019, 2).

This method of self-branding in Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan scene with its lack of financial opportunity and the lack of return from initial/continued investment leaves local performers financially vulnerable: 'there's potential for there to be more money earned from local performers, but the risks to make that money is so high. You have to spend to get there, and it's impossible for people who don't have those funds. Like that doesn't feel correct. To me, that doesn't feel right' (Participant 9). The frightening reality that this risk poses is evidenced by Participant 11:

> To be honest I have had to stop doing drag very recently, in the past couple of months. I wouldn't have been able to survive like this in Nottingham. Obviously, drag is so expensive to keep doing and it was taking me so long to get myself going in Nottingham, so I ended up having to move back home, leave my place, and save up a bit of money. I was spending so much and losing so much. I think a lot of people when they first try and get into drag, they don't realise how the cost is such an important factor. Like if you're not making enough money to cover your drag costs, you're going to go nowhere with a drag career (Participant 11).

For this local performer, the high costs of drag and increased pressure to invest to succeed in the local reputation economy were so costly that they had created a direct threat to their financial security outside of their drag work that eventually led to a premature end to their drag career. For them, the self-reliance that is invoked by the neoliberal self is one that had failed to support them and instead created economic hindrances which equated to a loss of their rented housing, and their artistic career.

Thus, the experiences that the performer shares demonstrate the high risks and suffering of the creative worker in a neoliberal economy/social space.

(iii)   Jack of All Trades: Development and Transferable Skills

The third category isolated to showcase methods of self-branding and marketing of the self is the development of transferable skills that arguably exist outside of the standard expectations of drag performance itself. Across the dataset, participants frequently articulate how they have developed (and continue to develop) their skills outside of drag performance, which one might regard as an investment in transferrable skills. Types of this skill development are articulated by Participant 3:

> A huge thing that I really enjoyed, that I didn't necessarily think about at the start is like learning all of these new skills, and things that are important to me in becoming a drag queen, like being able to mix music together, being able to edit film and video, being able to create costumes, being able to style myself, learning how to do makeup, learning how to walk and dance on the stage. You know, all these things, like, that are just exponential. People don't really think about the amount of energy that goes into all of these elements that create a drag queen. Things that are transferable, stuff that isn't necessarily drag, but are still super important. And that's been something that I really have enjoyed being able to learn and develop. But barely anyone has all those talents even though people like RuPaul expect it, although I don't dispute the fact that these things do make you develop as a queen and might make you develop as a performer (Participant 3).

The examples highlighted here and the expectation for performers to build new and ever-expanding skillsets for drag further reflect the idealised neoliberal subject who is self-reliant, by encouraging their participation in the knowledge economy and the kinds of unpaid labour and work-on-the-self that is typically associated with neoliberalism. The knowledge economy is a term used to describe how 'economic success is increasingly based upon the effective utilisation of intangible assets such as knowledge, skills and innovative potential as the key resource for competitive advantage' (Brinkley, 2006, 1). As ideologies around the successful neoliberal self reflect, the individual is increasingly expected to take on new forms of knowledge and skillsets, the efficacy of which should be continuously developed. In taking on the forms of learning and hands-on engagement with these new skillsets, performers establish their employability to potential employers and perform as self-reliant business owners. This exploration can be furthered through the consideration of additional administrative skills that drag performers feel must be learnt to successfully negotiate the drag scenes in this newly changed industry:

> When I first got started, I didn't realise that doing drag and making money from drag, only 20% of it is actually performing. Then another part of it is like making sure your costumes are

good and up to date. And then the majority of the rest of your time is emails, admin, and bargaining and doing maths and working out how we can afford this and how you can pay everybody and promotion, making posters, distributing them, printing them, putting them out, like it when it comes down to it the amount of drag that is actually onstage performing is so minimal (Participant 9).

In this way, the local performer is forced to become proficient in the multiple facets of business, yet in this case it is personified and individualised into the singular self, whereas larger business would distribute these skills and roles among their workforces. Therefore, a strain is placed on the individual: 'it really is super stressful and I think about it all the time. Like all of the time' (Participant 9). This development of skillsets and its ethos 'is built on a particularly modern conceptualisation of the self as an ongoing, reflexive project' where individuals have to re-shape 'themselves through a process of self-discovery' and propose 'an affinity between the needs of the self and the needs of the market' (Whitmer, 2019, 3). Moreover, it is in this knowledge economy and local market that 'individual is penalised harshly not only for personal failure but also for sheer bad luck in a highly competitive and relentlessly harsh social environment' and this is 'self-cultivated by neoliberalism, combining freewheeling consumer sovereignty with enterprising business acumen' (McGuigan, 2014, 234). The experiences of Participant 9 additionally address how the paid work they manage to acquire is both supported by and reliant on a vast amount of unpaid labour, in a way that is perhaps typical of the creative industries. This is since unpaid work is a common 'entry route into employment in the creative industries' (Siebert and Wilson, 2013, 711) despite the self-exploitative nature of this practice.

I would also like to briefly return to earlier discussion in the chapter around drag publics and the importance placed on the need to 'werk': it is the 'privileging of work [that] also narrows an understanding of drag into dog-eat-dog notions of perpetual competition and underplays how drag scenes have often historically functioned as a collective and inclusive space for minority groups' (Buck, 2019, 7). In many ways, these links between success and an individual's determination to work reflects neoliberal ideals around autonomy and self-reliance where performers become increasingly competitive.

(iv)   Multiple Streams of Business

Performers further demonstrate personal-branding and business acumen through their individual operation and ongoing development of multiple streams of business. Central to notion of the capitalist entrepreneur who enacts forms of self-branding is the belief that 'the free market cultivates society into a classless meritocracy where a fruitful career can be attained by anyone who truly strives to

achieve it' (Buck, 2019, 7). It is this promise that economic expenditure and business ventures will return financial success that entices performers to establish businesses themselves. Yet in the case of Nottingham once again, the lack of economic promise in the drag scene forces performers to establish different forms of occupation to secure financial stability.

Participant 15 is the only performer who self-identifies as a full-time drag performer. Ten of the other participants regard themselves as part-time drag performers in addition to working full-time in separate occupations. This reflects the low financial return of much drag performance in this local setting as performers so frequently need to 'supplement their drag income with other employment' (Zaslow, 2022, 18). Participants 1, 2, 3, and 8 all identify as drag performers, alongside operating an independent business that is in some way tied to or related to their drag persona work. This ranges from being a drag event organiser and promoter, working to create shows that offer opportunities to local performers (and themselves), to merchandising business owners and even suppliers of drag-related stock for other local performers (such as body padding, lashes, etc.). I have previously discussed how many performers wish to create profit from drag performance: 'I personally can't wait until I earn real money from doing drag' (Participant 6). Yet, I have discovered how unlikely this is for performers based on opportunity and financial support within the performance scene. Therefore, some of the participants endeavoured to create new business on the side of these performances so that they could successfully invest in their drag, continue to work, and build peer esteem within the scene. Participant 8 articulates this as follows: 'I am a drag performer and the company owner and director of a drag supply business' and 'I can make so much more money by selling to queens than performing as one. Even though I used to be paid more than local queens, especially since I used to travel and host a lot – it is nowhere near what I earn now and it was so much more tiring and life consuming. I still love getting into drag and still do it but my primary income comes from the supply business' (Participant 8). The performer here confirms earlier concerns around the financial opportunity around drag performance in local scenes, highlighting how their business outside of it and supplying other performers (knowing how imperative several performers believe self-investment in drag is) is far more profitable than performing: 'my aspirations are now to make my money by supporting others' (Participant 8).

Similarly, Participant 3 owns an artistic business where the products sold are closely related to the performer's drag persona and brand aesthetic:

> I've kind of got my artistic career and my drag career very much intertwined. They bounce off of one another and support one another. If someone follows my drag, then they find out about my other business and purchase from it. And my drag aesthetic directly flows into that other business. That way I get two separate types of income from drag. It almost acts as merchandise for me I guess (Participant 3).

Here the performer engages in direct commoditisation of their drag persona, which is translated into merchandise for purchase by followers and fans of their work. This potential for profit succeeds through the heightened commerciality of drag and highlights how 'the discourse of self-branding proposes a singular, profitable self which is at once authentic and consistent' and articulates how self-branding 'impacts the process of self-presentation, and how workers experience the imperative to self-brand' (Whitmer, 2019, 1). Participant 1 owns and runs a successful drag promotion and events organisation business, that runs primarily in the local scene but also creates work nationally. This also acts as their primary form of income rather than drag performance and, unlike in the cases of the last two respondents, this business earns its profits primarily through local shows containing *Ru-Girls* and local performers: 'this is my bread and butter; and 'I was the first one in Nottingham to bring any of the *Ru-Girls* to Nottingham and do any shows of that calibre' (Participant 1). In these forms of business-creation, local performers seeking to financially thrive (or simply survive) are indirectly informed by neoliberal discourse which determines that they 'are now free to work for themselves' and drives them to create a 'work-driven ethos' (Buck, 2019, 6-7). And yet, these streams of business open up new risks for performers such as in the case of Participant 1 who (as referenced in Chapter 4) has lost much of their business to the chain organisations of corporate 'big boys' (Participant 1) taking this work with higher prices offered to the drag stars as leverage. Therefore, the competitive nature of event organisation and drag performance is further heightened, which risks financial loss as these business streams become threatened by competitors.

(v)   Networking as A Business Tool

Performers also revealed how they utilise networking as a method with which they can further market their performer brand. The term networking has specific business connotations, turning social interaction into a business tool whereby knowledge, contacts, and professional opportunity are exchanged. Participants articulate how opportunities that they have found are through their networking within the local scene: 'a lot of it is done through people so it will be some of my friends that work somewhere that will introduce me to their friends and stuff like that. That's how I find a lot of shows and get booked for them' (Participant 6) and 'networking feels pretty intrinsic to booking slots, finding a place and people who like you' (Participant 13). Therefore, performers are conscious of the need for networking in and around their local community to create performance opportunities, considering these interactions as business-centric rather than social: 'the line between business networking and friendship is non-existent, as the handful of people on the planet who can relate to your lifestyle also happen to be possible joint venture partners and/or clients' (Mancinelli, 2020, 432).

In these ways, and in neoliberal frameworks, networking engages performers in a kind of superficial sociality whereby genuine social interaction is displaced by pressures to autonomously succeed.

Participant 11 discusses how they specifically tailor how they come across to potential employers in these networking situations: 'getting booked is so much more than talent or how good you are, you've got to sweet talk the potential bosses' and 'there is a mix of working hard but also being able to schmooze your way through it'. These articulations are corroborated by other performers also: 'there is definitely a lot of schmoozing' (Participant 13). The importance of professionalism and manipulation through 'schmoozing' for performance opportunity, problematises the idea of drag as an art form and instead places the work of the performer as business driven rather than purely artistic. The term 'schmoozing' here is also bound with an implicit accusation of insincerity, that seems to distance it from regular forms of professional conduct. This is further cemented by Participant 14:

> I go into the scene and have that the idea of I'm going to befriend you, and I'm going to become part of your social circle. I'll be, like, I'm going to be friendly with everyone. And I want to be everyone's friends because I am that person. But that opens up the idea of me being cheeky. I will tell people: I'm going to need you to book me, and I'm gonna get it. And it works for me. Being friendly and open with people helps, and it's nice, but it also works (Participant 14).

Whilst the motivations for this kind of networking appear complicated, as the participant seems to have a genuine intention to establish social relationships in the community, they also admit to using their friendly character to almost manipulate future employers which they admit has in the past secured them performance work. Consequently, by entrepreneurially conceptualising these social interactions as networking meetings, the performers showcase 'the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate [...] which generate emotional, financial, and practical benefit (Mancinelli, 2020, 433).

6.2) Blurring Lines and Boundaries: Consequences of the Development of the Neoliberal Self for the Individual

This section seeks to engage with the ways in which the expressions of a neoliberal and commercialised self permeate the lives of performers *outside* of their drag careers. Discussions here are centred around Nottingham's local drag community, the role of competitiveness in that community, and how this impacts the relationships of individuals that construct it **(6.21).** This is followed by explorations of how neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurialism, individualism, and competition interfere with the personal lives of local performers *outside* of their drag work **(6.2).**

6.21) The Local Drag Community and Competition

The highly competitive nature of the wider drag industries both nationally and transnationally has already been discussed through this thesis, highlighting how capitalist ideals of individual entrepreneurialism and globalisation, and the mainstreaming of art forms like drag, have worked conjunctively to reinforce the already competitive nature of local drag scenes. Thus far, discussions have not detailed how this sense of competition amongst performers, re-shapes and permeates well-documented and necessary notions of community in drag scenes, with drag potentially becoming a socially polarising force that problematises the friendships and relationship building so integral to LGBTQIA+ communities and their support. This section attempts to address this omission. The term community is broad and polysemous. In sociologically grounded academic work, the term is sometimes defined as a collective of individuals who relate to one another's 'foundational aspects' and 'shared features' which in this case is through their self-identified queerness and identification as drag performers working in the same local scene (Carnes, 2019, 3). Wider academic debate has sought to engage with the ideas around community within drag scenes, and how they positively impact the social experiences of performers who engage with it. This includes discussions like that of Moncrieff and Leonard who, working with drag participants, discovered that to some extent performers had typically 'greater social networks' and were 'better connected' than other LGBTQIA+ members of the community, with a lot of 'social influence' in local communities, and intentions of improving their 'social standing' when beginning drag (Moncrieff and Leonard, 2017, 7-8). Academics such as Knutson, Koch, Sneed and Lee detail how drag provides 'membership in a community of individuals with shared similar interests and identities' and through this community membership performers benefit from forming 'friendships', 'feeling safe' and 'having a common goal' (2018, 42-5). Some academic discussion highlights how notions of community are complicated by neoliberal competitiveness: 'scrutiny from other drag queens is intense and competition for recognition between impersonators is great' (Moncrieff and Leonard, 2017, 2). Yet there is room for further exploration here.

In contrast with Moncrieff and Leonard's work, I found that competition between drag performers in local scenes is not simply for recognition. Whilst reputation might be considered an important factor, due to the overwhelming significance of a lack of opportunity and the financial difficulty this creates, the competition within local scenes is a financial one where not to compete is to lose financial stability and to compete is to attempt to get a return on investment and/or gain some form of economic profit (as one would expect in any form of occupation). The pursuit of financial opportunities is perceived to create rifts among performers, undermining the friendships and relationship-building crucial to broader discussions within existing literature on queer/drag communities.

Like, there's been a few times that I've ended up not talking to some queens, who I used to really get on well with and be friendly with, for, like, a couple of months. Because I've got a gig, for example, and they've literally said to me, I don't think you deserve that gig. And I'm, like, that's fine but you're a bit of a knob. There is definitely a lack of support. I mean, usually everyone eventually becomes friendly-ish again. So, it's not like a real huge issue I guess. But yeah, there's been a few occasional times that I've literally been told I didn't deserve to get a part. And also, even if things aren't physically said you definitely feel like there's a certain vibe with people you compete against for slots you know. It's weird. It's definitely not a nice feeling, like when you get something that others don't, but that's also the name of the game (Participant 2).

Participant 2 here addresses how rivalry between performers for financial opportunities in drag clearly drives people within the community apart, once again encouraging and suggesting greater reward for individualism rather than for comradery and community, and therefore idealising notions of entrepreneurialism within the neoliberal self. They report how their one-time friends and community members, became competitors due to the lack of opportunity presented in the scene. And whilst they acknowledge that obtaining paid work ahead of their community members is sometimes difficult emotionally, they simply *have to* in order to support themselves. In this way, the nature of this 'cutthroat industry' (Participant 15) is evidenced as one that perpetuates the importance of financial gain over the promotion of social networking and building community within regional scenes and therefore highlights how 'neoliberalism affects workplaces' such as local scenes by establishing and enforcing 'instrumentality, individualism, and competition' (Bal and Doci, 2018, 536).

This nature of competition and its potentially deleterious effect upon friendships and alliances within the community is also evidenced by reports of pay undercutting between performers for performance spots. Performer 9 discusses this clearly: 'You find that individuals begin to undercut one another by charging lower prices, which is also problematic because they are minimising their competitors' worth' (Participant 9). There are several accounts of this kind of undercutting of other performers within the local community, including reports from Participants 2, 5, 6, 9, 13, and 15. Through this business-centric kind of undercutting, local performers once again enforce notions of individualism and showcase changes in social logic whereby workers in this industry are forced to adapt and 'perceive themselves as individuals rather than part of collectives' (Bal and Doci, 2018, 540). Not only does this problematically reduce the profit that an individual obtains, but it also works to reduce the overall worth of performers more generally within the scene. Therefore, the already problematic low pay rates in Nottingham become cheaper for employers and even less rewarding for performers. This is evidently created by the highly competitive nature that the material conditions of Nottingham's drag scene elicit, highlighting how drag performers are 'expected to project a fierce competitive spirit' to financially survive (Buck, 2017, 3).

Some participants from this study describe how they feel as if common perceptions of the Nottingham queer community are overly pleasant, and that the true nature is not what it sometimes seems:

> I don't think it's just community and friendship. I think that's what people try and pose it as. I don't think it is like that at all. I think it's a lot more of a harsher world. You know, the drag scene imitates wider society in a way like it is a dog-eat-dog world that is full of competition. And I think that there are tensions between the different sort of groups in drag. I mean, if I were to look at Nottingham's drag scene, I could sort of tell you that you would see older queens - the sort of people that don't necessarily focus too much on their makeup, but make up for that in their personalities, and through their singing, you know, they have a sort of older style of drag. Then you've got the alternative queens, where a few alternative queens have sort of looked down on myself and a few of the other queens purely because we're mainstream, because we're the sort of, you know, quote-unquote normal drag queen. Obviously, there's been a queen before who would sort of turn their nose up when they knew the style of drag that I was doing, and also because of the sort of venues I was working in. Despite them also being hired by the same venue. Then there are the sort of newer queens, the students that have just sort of arrived in Nottingham, the 18 to 20 year olds, that are just starting drag, very fashion focused, very sort of, not necessarily getting anywhere with a drag, but mostly doing it for a laugh, and mostly doing it for that sort of community aspect. Like, I do think there are different cliques. And I think it's impossible to say that there is just the one scene. And based on community and friendship, I think there are several different scenes within Nottingham. Just like any, I think any other city has several different scenes. And I think there are sort of some conflicts like cultural conflicts between those definitely. That community is not wholesome, it is fucked up. There are smaller communities within it I guess, but we are definitely not all singing songs together (Participant 11).

The performer here reveals how there are multiple sub-groups in the overarching drag community, each one with its own separate set of ideals and relations that separate them from other groups of performers. This very much reflects how, within drag communities, forms of 'intense competition' usually facilitate the 'emergence of drag families, with seniors controlling and mentoring cadets' (Moncrieff and Leonard, 2017, 3). This kind of social community breakdown highlights how individuals 'are increasingly shaped by political and economic institutional logics that organise competition among them and drive isomorphic and rationalising processes in their populations and [embed notions] of free market principles in community development organisations' (Macleod and Emejulu, 2014, 438). It is these logics that 'seep into the logic of local people […] [which then becomes] counterproductive to these groups' social and economic interests' (Macleod and Emejulu, 2014, 438). In the excerpt from Participant 11 above, polarising tensions within the community are not only built through notions of competition as discussed earlier, but also through ideas of professionalism. These are articulated through differences of opinion about styles of drag which, for some performers, are becoming 'mainstream' whilst others remain 'alternative'. Resultant incompatible 'professional identities' drive individuals apart (Fraser, 2018, 437). In establishing a kind of hierarchy that is defined by a performer's choice of style, aesthetic and where they choose to perform, the Nottingham drag community and those who construct it add greater importance to notions of competition rather than

to community building. Therefore, whilst the complex dynamics of Nottingham's locality drives these senses of competition in its drag community, neoliberalism plays a pivotal role in its elicitation. It becomes dominant over friendship within these communities for some, and therefore enforces a 'new paradigm in the governance of human beings' (Fraser, 2018, 437).

It is worth acknowledging that the drag community itself is one that, whilst already minoritised through its queerness, can be argued to be an even further minoritised community in its wider LGBTQIA+ circle. Performers in lesser-metropolitan areas such as Nottingham's drag scene, who are desperate to find paid work to sustain their drag occupations, 'have to become competitive on the labour market' which 'leads to an extrinsic motivation […] to be more employable and desirable than others' (Bal and Doci, 2018, 539). A community that should, and could, be unified in efforts to perform and reinvigorate local scenes with that work whilst simultaneously building strong connection and relationship with colleagues, is instead placed in situations of economic survival where the significance of community and its inner networks are diminished in the shadow of neoliberal ideals of individualism and competitiveness.

6.22) Blurring Lines Between the Personal and the Occupational

Whilst the last section engaged with the effect of neoliberal individualism on relationships in the wider drag community, this subsection seeks to address its effects on the individual self-outside of the drag scene. It intends to achieve this through explorations of how the liminal and intangible lines drawn between the personal/social lives and the occupational lives of local drag performers become blurred through their engagement with drag performance in the contexts that have been articulated throughout this chapter. The main areas of focus here will be: (i) the conflation of personal and drag identities, (ii) issues around dating and building relationships, (iii) susceptibility to resistance, homophobia, and other forms of violence/attack, (iv) issues around financial stability, and (v) the way in which all these factors contribute to a potentially higher risk to the quality of performers' mental health.

(i) Identity Conflation

The identity of drag performers and how they regard their drag personae/identities has been the subject of widespread discussion in academia. Berkowitz and Belgrave seem to lead these discussions in their explorations of drag performers' celebrity status where they highlight how their participants

clearly 'distinguish between their real or core identities and their drag identities (2010, 180). Whilst my participants' reflections partially corroborate these claims, they infer an evident conflation between these identities. This therefore supports claims of performance theorists who might maintain that the separation of drag identity and being 'distinct from their selves [is] in fact illusory' and far more complicated than being completely alternate to the personal self (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 181).

Identity as a term usually refers to 'who or what one is' and characterises the 'various traits or meanings attached to one by the self and others […] [therefore] identities are the most public aspect of the self' (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 163). Through its emphasis on transformation and the adoption of a new identity through a drag persona, the performance of drag 'clearly involves the manipulation of identity' for its performers (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 163). Yet for many, the very creation of drag personae often incorporates not only the artistic vision of performers (and as argued earlier, considerations of audience expectation) but is formed through an alternate framing of the personal self: 'When I made [drag performer name] she was an alternate version of me, she was everything that I wasn't. Our personalities are very different, but then at the same time there is a lot that is similar between us. It's inevitable I guess, that we sometimes act very similar' (Participant 7). Participant 7 reveals through this example how, despite initially attempting to create an alternative drag persona, there is an apparent conflation of personality characteristics between themselves and their performer-self. Participant 1 further cements these claims when they discuss how characteristics that they regarded as central to their drag persona had begun to infiltrate how they conducted their personal self in their previously main occupation of teaching:

> That's when I realised I was living my life through [drag performer name] especially when I was teaching kids. Because when I was a teacher, I performed at the same time although it was only a little bit in comparison to now. I found that I would always use certain, like, phrases and jokes, that felt like they were coming from [drag name] and not necessarily me. The kids loved it and I realised that I went into [drag name] mode when I was teaching. And I found that I was a lot more, like, upfront and confident. Perhaps even a little more brash, like, even outside of the classroom I even became a little less forgiving with colleagues, sassier maybe? (Participant 1).

The performer clearly articulates a set of common characteristics between their drag personality and their work persona outside of drag. The performer highlights how they altered the ways in which they conducted their main work, how they engaged in social interaction, and even how the choice of language used was bound with their drag identity. Whilst this conflation does not imply anything sinister or problematic, it is noteworthy that through continued engagement with drag, performers feel that their personal self in some way undergoes a type of reflexive self-transformation that

partially parallels the transformative process undertaken by getting into drag. Therefore, drag performance itself, in addition to 'the organisational and ideological context in which it takes place, often transforms' what we might consider to be 'the politics of the drag performer' surrounding identity (Shapiro, 2007, 251). Participant 1 even admits to utilising their personal experiences, even in a sexual and therefore sensitive capacity, to build their drag performances: 'even during gigs and sets I talked a lot about my sex life, I usually use my personal life and then I twist it and then a lot of people think it's made up. But, actually, there is a kind of truth in it, in a weird way' (Participant 1). Thus, the physical performance enacted by the drag persona directly intertwines with the personal, and sensitive matters of the personal self, furthering claims that the identities of performers (personal and personae) are very hard to separate clearly: 'drag is always an element of you' (Participant 4). In this way drag also personifies how modern identities are 'multilayered' and altered depending on social settings (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 163).

Considering this prevalence of identity conflation across participant interviews, we might then address how performers also articulated various ways in which this kind of merging between supposedly separated personal and drag identities has negative implications for the personal self of performers *outside* of their drag work. Participants often articulated how their engagement with drag performance in local scenes often led them to not being able to 'switch off' (Participant 15) and finding it hard to draw lines between the time they spend undertaking their drag work and their personal time away from drag:

> I definitely end up thinking about drag way too much. Some nights, I'll stay up way too late, leave myself tired the next day, because I need to finish editing a poster or doing loads of photoshop bits or sending emails, or even planning a performance or a new outfit. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy doing it. And I love it when it's finished. But it takes up so much of my personal time. I usually think, God, I don't have this time right now. It definitely finds its ways into taking my personal time away a lot of the time. I wish I had more of my own personal life outside of drag to talk about to people sometimes because I end up talking about my shows, and I don't want people to think that I'm, like, oh, business business, come to the show. Yeah. And again, that's just like one of my babies (Participant 9).

Clearly for this performer, their work in drag penetrates their personal life and the time which they could invest in other things. Participant 15 makes similar comments, suggesting that the reason for their overworking is due to their work in drag being an artistic passion that has been commodified and through its development into a stream of business has placed new pressures on them to overwork (separating it from other kinds of work, like clerical work for example):

> There's a difference between my drag occupation and somebody who does a nine-to-five office job, because it feels like there's no switching off. Imagine if I had a different job I would

do a Monday to Friday and work comfortably in an office. Monday through until Sunday I do drag. So yeah, to a certain extent, I am constantly on the go, and it's no excuse, but its why it's took so long to actually put this in place and become a drag performer full time. Because, when calendars [are] constantly clashing, it's very hard for me to find time unless it has been planned in for a long time. I love it. I always have and its why I keep doing it. But, it's lost a sense of that fun for me now after doing it as a job for so long. And it stops me from doing a lot of the things I wish I could be doing with my spare time. Because I have none. I don't really get any spare time anymore (Participant 15).

In the search for paid work and further maximisation of income through occupational and self-development, performers reflect how neoliberal intent and the encouragement of 'heightened productivity' can generate 'psychological distress, instability, pressure, and a negative working environment' by cementing types of 'capitalist realism' (Telford and Briggs, 2022, 59-63).

Additionally, other forms of these pressures also manifest themselves in the operation of performer's work, due to the intrinsic ties between performers' personal and drag-based identities. Participant 9, for example, continues to articulate how their drag identity forms a part of their personal reputation and so the reception of that identity bears direct consequences for the personal self: 'because my identity is so entwined with my drag, every performance, every poster I put out, is a part of my reputation, almost my personal reputation. So, if anything, were to not match up with how I want to be perceived or was ill-received. That would feel personal, and I would take that as personal flaw that I've put out there. It would be down to me' (Participant 9). Once again performers, through this example, internalise the kind of self-reliance and need for financial/occupational responsibility that neoliberal ideology thrusts upon them since under that ideology 'all that remains is to individualistically and cynically adapt to current working conditions' (Telford and Briggs, 2022, 60). Participant 2 also reports feelings of self-cynicism due to this responsibility and the risk to their reputation which is posed through the dissemination of their drag identity: 'I am always very aware of how what I do reflects on me, and that's why I spend so many hours preparing for my drag: editing photos, posting online, buying drag outfits. A lot of the time I look at what I do and figure out how to improve it, see what I don't like and when you nit-pick like that it becomes pretty depressing. But I need to show that I can be the best'. The inner tensions between self-preservation across both drag and personal identities and the importance of the reputation economy, create senses of self-doubt and persuades performers to improve for success in a way that makes them 'a self-policing subject' (Buck, 2019, 11).

Feelings of seeing one's own personal identity swamped by the reputation garnered by their drag identity is a theme that also occurs across interview datasets, almost echoing notions of local celebrity status and its implications:

[Drag Name} is a character that is created that allows me to travel, see great places, make friends. But at the end of the show, she goes back into a suitcase. And then [participant's birth name] takes the reins again. There is a handful of times where people don't understand that, right? So, they believe, even though [drag name] has took the week off and the makeup off, that I'm still [drag name] so then they'll come to me or they'll see me, I don't know, maybe out in a shopping centre or … and they'll run over and have a picture and I'm, like, but I'm not [drag name]. And that to me, and as much as I appreciate the enthusiasm for [drag name] and what she does, there's a lack of understanding of me as an individual. Why would they want a picture of me out of drag, we aren't the same person. It's kind of an invasion of my privacy (Participant 15).

Participant 15 here shares how they are burdened by their drag persona's ability to replace the personal self's reputation, deeming them as less interesting than their drag counterpart and therefore reducing self-worth. These reflections are corroborated by the work of Knutson et al, who state that for performers 'fans begin to treat them only as drag queens and that their other accomplishments, goals, or priorities are not recognised by others' in a process that involves the 'loss of self' (Knutson et al., 2018, 41). As the personal self is eclipsed by the performer self or the drag persona, participants' characteristics are dismissed in favour of the reputation economy's ideals and the neoliberal encouragement of financial independence/success through the celebrated drag persona.

Performance and performativity are intrinsically related but also separate, with performance relating here not only to the entertainment aspect of a drag performer's role but also to the actions and behaviours of that performer within their associated social context. Performativity here refers to how such actions and behaviours produce, reinforce, or even disrupt social norms and identities. In neoliberal times, these terms become increasingly significant. Market logic and the importance placed upon neoliberal individualism, align with its ideals of competition and personal success. Therefore, drag performers' new identities through their creation of personae to maximise their economic utility and pursue a successful drag-based career (which is also inextricably bound with their everyday-lived identity as evidenced above), become subject to the enforcement of neoliberal agendas and the performance of self-commodification. Here, both identities of the performer (drag persona and the everyday-lived) become intertwined with success and market-value above their artistic or personal integrity. The individual identity then increasingly relates itself to the neoliberal subject where the performance of identity is artificial and even hollow, both in-drag (through edited stylistic choices) and outside of it (through carefully considered social networking for business opportunities).

(ii)   Dating and Building Relationships

Whilst 'manufacturing a drag persona specifically for work' is used by performers as a 'deliberate strategy that is consciously constructed' (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 180) to engage in a detached way in competitive local markets, the identities formed cause a series of difficulties for performers when dating and building relationships outside of the drag community. Participant 8 clearly demonstrates this, although there are numerous other references to this type of hindrance to dating across the dataset:

> I think I was already very conscious of my appearance and stuff. It was more to do with the presentation of oneself in terms of femininity and being overly expressive and being camp. People don't want to associate themselves with somebody that's more comfortable in their femininity even though it's their true selves because that is intimidating to the people that don't like it, and drag is a complete personification of that. And that creates massive issues for me when it comes to dating, and I don't think that it's my fault. People really do have a problem with the fact that I do drag. It's the kind of toxic masculinity and internalisation of that, it makes people refuse to deal with it and downright treat you like an outcast even if they are queer. You are just too queer for them. Or not the right kind of queer. You are good enough to be fetishised and turned into some kind of kink, but not fit for a stable relationship. I have had several encounters where people are like – you are nice, but I don't want to date a drag queen (Participant 8).

Participant 8 raises important questions around toxic masculinity and the different kinds of internalised homophobia that are widespread in queer communities. Yet, the focus here reveals that this kind of attitude is aggravated by the presence of a performer's drag identity, and its interference with a performer's personal life. This is discussed by Berkowitz and Belgrave who state that 'even the most revered and celebrated drag queens had difficulty finding men who would take them seriously as a lover and partner, a pattern that underscores the marginality of drag queens in the larger gay community' (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 161). Therefore, this kind of social and personal hindrance to relationship building is yet another example of how drag performance and the search for opportunity and paid work blurs boundaries between the personal and the occupational for performers: 'drag performers may experience difficulty dating and/or establishing long term relationships due to negative perceptions held by individuals outside the drag community and other factors' (Knutson et al., 2018, 34).

(iii)   Homophobia and Other Forms of Violence

There are several reports of different kinds of homophobia, and other forms of violence that participants endure and are subjected to through their work in drag. Whilst these aren't necessarily

indicative of neoliberal ideology, they do articulate yet another example of how performers' personal lives are affected by their drag occupation and some examples are indeed more likely to occur due to the neoliberal operations of Nottingham's cultural scene.

Such threats elicit feelings of uneasiness, distress, and feelings of being unsafe for performers enacting drag in public settings: 'You always get shouted at or whatever […] I always feel really unsafe in drag now because of examples like that. It's horrible, but I guess you just have to get over it' (Participant 12). In addition to exemplifying the kinds of harassment and threat of violence that performers are subjected to, such cases should be considered alongside the lack of safe spaces across Nottingham due to the bars that enact only temporary queerness (as argued in Chapter 4) and their geographical proximity to other more heteronormative bars. Interestingly though, the participant details how they feel the need to simply overcome this kind of threat for their drag to survive, echoing the neoliberal discourse of overcoming one's own issues, regardless of one's minoritisation, for success – as neoliberalism promises to reward 'resilient populations who can overcome their race/glass/gender' and 'profit from melancholy' (James, 2015). In these ways, 'competing in the production and sale of commodities consolidates cultural identities and community commitments even as it produces sharp differences in material well-being' (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2002, 114).

Participant 15 also reports forms of privacy invasion they experienced through acts of sexual harassment (virtually and physically), that are a direct result of their drag identities. Participant 15 was the only performer to note this, but their testimony points to its broader prevalence:

> I've had pictures sent from straight men who sort of objectify me. I've had messages from women of married men who try to start conversations that you wouldn't expect, if that makes sense. I mean, if I worked in Waitrose, for example, and I received an inbox from a customer, showing me everything that he's got because he found me attractive in drag something would happen. I would be protected. But not doing drag. That's what you're subjected to as a drag queen sometimes (Participant 15).

Already severe, these accusations are cemented when the performer admits that in addition to being subjected to unsolicited sexual images by audiences, they themselves have also had someone 'grab their bum on stage and in the streets', 'try to find what I have tucked', and 'feel my boobs' (Participant 15). Pointing to the broader prevalence of this kind of harassment, they detail how they have seen this happen to multiple performers across Nottingham's drag scene: 'the sheer amount of queens that I know that have been touched whilst on stage and offstage in Nottingham is crazy' (Participant 15).

Whilst drag remains a 'powerful performative act' for those conducting it, performers are also plagued with the 'less glamorous lives of drag queens: threats of verbal and physical cruelty' (Berkowitz and

Belgrave, 2010, 160). This even extends into varying forms of sexual harassment and assault as performers are further exposed to these kinds of violence through the public presence, that they work so hard to build to become competitive in the reputation economy. The social media presence of drag performers and their dependence on its utilisation should also be considered as a main factor here, but this will be explored in much more detail in the following chapter. Participant 15 begins to also evidence how performers such as themselves feel the need to hide their emotional responses to these acts of violence and threat so as to not tarnish the reputation and local celebrity status that they have built for themselves: 'performers need smoke and mirrors, and we stay quiet about things like this to keep our appearance and keep that strong aesthetic that we need' (Participant 15). It is harassment such as this that replicates how common 'experiences of minority stress among LGBT people in general produces elevated rates of depression, suicidality, and other forms of psychological distress' (Knutson et al, 2018, 34). However, once again, this example given by the participant reflects how the individual performer and their emotional capacity is self-policed and limited so that their self-brand can be easily marketed to build their social presence and reputation. In this way, the performer's emotional and therefore personal self, once more, becomes less worthy than the occupational self and neoliberal self.

(iv)   Financial Stability

Throughout their responses, participants discuss the extremely low rates of pay that they often accept for their drag work. Participant 11 details how there are significant issues with 'not being paid' for their work in Nottingham, or if performers are paid, 'it is usually only a very small amount for the work we are doing' and in Nottingham 'you are not going to be paid fairly as a drag queen, it's not the career to make money in'. Whilst this would indicate a less entrepreneurially driven outlook to this lack of financial opportunity, other performers have different motivations when it comes to accepting this kind of unfair pay. Some participants, like Participant 7, discuss how they will accept small amounts or even a complete lack of payment for their work as it rewards them with exposure:

> I do actually just take some gigs just to get the exposure, because sometimes exposure is better than money. So, I don't get paid for a lot of gigs and even when I do, I only get paid little amounts at this time in my career' and through this 'they're exploiting me in every single way but at the same time, I sometimes take audience growth and reach when I can get it. I want to be successful you know. Whereas I am just taking the audience growth (Participant 7).

The performer here articulates their entrepreneurial need to increase their reputation within the local scene so much that they are willing to accept minimal or a complete lack of pay in return for their work (even though, as already discussed, drag is an ultimately expensive art form to create/perform). Here then, the participant highlights the importance of the neoliberal reputation economy and therefore how they internalise notions of the neoliberal self. The term 'reputation economy' is one where definitions vary, but for many (and for the purpose of this study) it relates to the monetisation of the individual through social relations and reputation building.

The need to generate a neoliberal self and engage within this reputational economy is represented in the quote by Participant 7, since they place so much importance on building a reputation over their own immediate financial gain/stability as they see this will eventually lead to financial income. This is relevant given that performers know how they economically exploit themselves through this action and perpetuate the normalisation of the exploitation of others. Arguments around the creative industries and their position within neoliberal economies enter these discussions, since this example highlights how creative workers are typically 'prepared to work for long hours for little or even no pay' and require 'minimal support' since they have learnt to be accepting of the lack of opportunity at their disposal (Conor et al., 2015, 2). Their financial surroundings and lack of decent employment opportunity within their field (drag performance) coerces performers into working for free or low pay rates, in the hopes of eventual return in the form of a growing positive reputation that will in turn allow the potential for more financial opportunity and increase their positions in local reputational hierarchies. Participant 8 sees issue with these behaviours, yet also directly criticises their fellow performers within the community for accepting them deeming that it lowers their worth:

> I think that sounds like some of the working drag girls as well. If you accept 50 or 60 quid for a gig you aren't ever gonna get paid more, some girls do it for drinks vouchers I have seen it and it's so stupid. It is so important to set a precedent for your pay in drag because it reflects back on to you. And not only, like, financially but, like, if you're selling yourself out, and you've got nothing to show for it. How are you going to, like, pat yourself on the back and be like, yeah, I did that, like, when you wake up the next day? (Participant 8).

Whilst the participant here addresses justified concerns over the financial logic surrounding these kinds of opportunities, they inadvertently also reinforce notions of neoliberal self-reliance. In almost placing direct blame on the individuals who accept these pay rates, they fail to acknowledge the very pressures and associated financial difficulties that force a performer into these transactions. The wealth effect here ultimately becomes highly problematised since performers are becoming more and more entangled between supporting themselves financially and building their drag reputation, leading

to a potentially very precarious financial position regardless of how this ideology links 'directly to the ideology of entrepreneurship and the mythology of the […] go-getter' (Buck, 2019, 15).

This chapter has explored how 'drag queens are marginalised, both economically and socially' (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 159) and it has been evidenced that the local drag performer usually finds financial precarity as a reward for their work. These difficulties around financial stability directly affect the personal lives of performers. Participant 12 notes the financial hierarchy in Nottingham's local drag scene and directly associates this lack of success, despite persistent hard work for recognition, with lower senses of self-worth:

> There's an unfortunate hierarchy that I think comes into play sometimes. And it can really get your spirits down if you let it. I definitely struggle with the fact that, you know, I don't get that many gigs. And I do work so hard for it, too. It makes you feel like you are way less than others. But you know, it's difficult because there are now so many younger drag queens and if they're looking for a specific vibe for the night, they might not want your vibe. But that's the thing, I have to sell myself in a way that they will want to book me in that sense. But if I can't, and they decide that I'm not the right vibe, then that's not my problem. But it's unfortunate for me because I didn't get the job. Unfortunate for them because I am quite confident that I do a good job. But let's be honest I could really do with the money, otherwise I don't know how long I can keep this up (Participant 12).

The performer feels a sense of internalised unworthiness that is determined by the high levels of competition within Nottingham's drag market, and that their success as a drag performer is reliant on how many paid bookings they obtain. Whilst they are confident that they are good enough for such opportunities they also address a very real consequence of the scene's financial competitiveness, that they simply need to be paid for their work or they might not be able to continue their work in drag. Consequently, the performer echoes earlier discussions around examples provided by Participant 11 who no longer takes part in drag performance due to a lack of funds to invest into their work as 'income' for many performers 'is the primary reason for continuing with drag performance' (Berkowitz and Belgrave, 2010, 178).

(v)   Quality of Mental Health

This final section explores how performers within Nottingham's local drag scene report a worsening of their mental health as a consequence of their drag occupations. It should be noted here that several of my respondents suggest that drag can also improve mental health. Participant 5 notes that: 'drag has made the biggest difference to my life, it has made me so much more confident and got me through some really hard stuff that happens to you'. Participant 12 even explains how their difficult

history with mental illness has been to some extent alleviated by their engagement in the local drag scene: 'the expression I get to have, the community of people around me that continue to support you, it has all had a massive influence on how I am now in such a better mental state than I was pre-drag… I was in a very difficult place before mentally'. These claims can be corroborated by the work of Knutson, Sneed, Koch, and Lee, which claims that participants in their study felt that drag was a form of 'antidepressant […] [and was] known to improve [their] quality of life' (2018, 46).

However, the responses of several participants in this doctoral study contrast this positive perception. Participant 1 clearly notes how their ongoing work in drag has created a definite strain on their mental health, even noting how they directly see the pressures of the scene as responsible for their 'depression and anxiety':

> Doing drag here can really mentally … can affect you, especially if you aren't a very confident person, because you can lose yourself. I did a few months ago. I was losing myself massively. I wasn't very comfortable as myself. I didn't know how to, like, be myself anymore. I had no energy to be myself anymore. That could be my depression and anxiety but, drag definitely adds to that and creates new issues. In fact, I think it made it all so much worse. I suffer with depression and anxiety and they are a part of my genetic makeup I guess. The pressure of performing is really draining and definitely has an effect on the way I feel. I recently met with a client as myself, not in drag, and ended up as [drag performer name]. I don't why. As myself, I can come across as a bit grumpy and I can retreat into myself quite a lot and you become really exhausted. I can't tell jokes as myself. And even though I can as [drag performer name] its hard, and you have to try so hard to change the dynamic of the room and environment. You're not getting paid to depress people. I have been having bad anxiety for a few weeks and on Friday night I am travelling two and a half hours to a gig. I nearly had to cancel because the thought of stressing out getting ready in drag, then commuting all that time, performing all night, having to be talking and laughing all night too, its just too much for me. You have to learn the tools that let you be able to do the things you need to do. Whether you are healthy or unhealthy you still have to perform and get it done. And I need to do this to stay afloat moneywise. It's a constant thing even when you don't realise you are thinking about it. And I know it sounds daft fighting age and myself as you get older, but you can be set in your ways a little bit and you begin to doubt yourself so much more. When you get older you begin to over-analyse everything and question what you can and can't do, and should or shouldn't. Sometimes it's exhausting. But you do it. This is a job that I love. But it is so much harder than people might perceive (Participant 1).

What Participant 1 reveals here is not only how they feel the need to persistently keep up with performing regardless of how their mind and body react to that pressure, but also how performers' personal lives are affected in ways evidenced in this chapter (namely the conflation of identity and financial stability). This lowers the quality of the performer's health. Although experiencing the negative effects of increased feelings of depression and anxiety and tiredness and fatigue of the mind and body, the performer feels that they must dismiss and learn to overcome these issues for the good of their business and financial stability. Once again, the performer's personal self is regarded as less

important than their drag persona, since the drag persona is the self that can compete in local financial markets, that can build social presence within the reputation economy and can help the individual to survive in this changed industry. The work of Knutson and Koch corroborates the participant's experience. They argue that the drag performer, through their extension of social presence in their drag personae, exhibit 'high levels of depression' (Knutson and Koch, 2019, 64-5). They also consider how these higher rates of mental health issues are influenced by drag performers' social positioning as 'sexual orientation minorities, as gendered beings, and as members of a creative workforce' (Knutson and Koch, 2019, 64-5). In this way regional performers in these contexts become the minoritised subjects of neoliberalism that they seek to release themselves from. Through their financial gain and engagement with individualism/competition, they reflect 'a measure of [neoliberalism's] substantive hollowness' whilst it 'stamps price and profit onto the very souls of who live under it' (Rodgers, 2018, 80-84).

6.3) Comparing Metropolitan and Lesser-Metropolitan: Manchester and Nottingham

There are evident similarities between the experiences of Nottingham-based *and* Manchester-based performers in their respective drag scenes, with specific relation to their self-commodification. Yet, these similarities are also bound up with nuanced differences that are geographically specific to each of the two cities.

Similarly to the experiences of Nottingham's drag performers, Manchester-based participants reported an oversaturation of local performers. This inevitably leads to heightened senses of competition within its drag community: 'there is an awful lot of us here in Manchester, too many you might say […] because of that we are constantly butting heads with each other and that causes a lot of drama between us' (Participant 4 M). The value that neoliberalism affords to competitive individualism and the pursuit of wealth is once again echoed here, displacing the building of relationships and community for individual success. In these ways, it reminds us that neoliberalism itself pulls us 'away from any focus on community, collaboration, or caring for each other's welfare' (Freedman and Combs, 2020, 194). These rifts in the local community that individual competitiveness catalyses are similar to those addressed previously with regard to Nottingham's drag community.

Yet, Participant 3 M, whilst also drawing attention to this oversaturation, suggests that Manchester offers more than enough work for its local performers:

> There definitely is a lot of us drag queens in Manchester, which makes you work a lot harder to be successful. That lies with you and on your eagerness to succeed and earn money. If you are willing to look for it there is more than enough paid work for all of us […] we are very lucky here because of that, because of drag's success here. I never have to work for free and never would (Participant 3 M).

Echoing the discussions of Manchester's thriving night-time economy earlier in this thesis (4.5), this performer acknowledges a privilege that Manchester-based performers have over their counterparts based in other cities, like those in Nottingham for example. This is due to not only the lively queer nightlife scene Manchester harbours but also the drag opportunities its queer spaces provide.[32] Therefore a stark contrast between Manchester-based and Nottingham-based drag scenes is formed regarding the availability of financial opportunities.

This contrast is cemented further by differences not only in levels of access to financial opportunities (through paid performance bookings), but also through the contrasting pay rates of those opportunities between the two cities. Performers in Nottingham frequently reported low pay rates, whilst some participants even acknowledged that a lot of their work in drag remains unpaid, with them often working solely for experience and/or visibility in the local scene. Whilst not all Manchester-based participants highlighted an evident contrast to this, three of them did. Participant 1 M revealed that they pride themselves on their ability to maintain their drag career as a full-time occupation: 'I no longer have to work in an office, or in a retail store, instead I can earn more money than ever before by doing something that I love'. Whilst some performers based in Nottingham were also able to make drag their main form of livelihood, this was a rarity in those interviewed. Additionally, where performers in Nottingham were able to work solely as a drag performer, they still reported difficulties in maintaining a stable income to sustain themselves. This differs greatly from Participant 1 M who 'earns more money than [they] ever have' and Participant 3 M who has been 'able to recently buy a new house and still buy new outfits regularly' through their occupation. Whilst I am careful to not disregard the hindrances I presume many performers in Manchester face, these examples offer insight not only into the success of that city's drag scene but also into a potential difference between the income of performers based in Manchester and those in smaller cities like Nottingham.

Manchester-based performers, similarly to those working in Nottingham, often have to facilitate their own performance work by networking with surrounding venues: 'I speak regularly with a lot of bars and whatnot in the area, to set up events so that I can perform there' (Participant 4 M). This facilitation

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[32] Participant 2 M corroborates this: 'you get beaten to the punch by other performers regularly, only because there are so many of us going for the same job, but when that happens you usually are able to find an alternative here' (Participant 2 M).

for some in Manchester, however, is not entirely necessary for all paid work undertaken, differing from the experiences of performers in Nottingham. Participant 2 M states that they are 'usually headhunted and given a [performance] spot by the city's pride committee for the huge pride event' held annually in Manchester. Yet, they also shared their dismay at not being offered the same opportunity in the year in which the interview took place: 'I was actually hurt and quite pissed off that they didn't contact me about performing this year, it's a lot of money and now I don't have that spot I usually do' (Participant 2 M). The often-unpaid labour of drag performers, through networking and the facilitation of such events, is not found here. Participant 2 M instead expects this performance opportunity to be offered to them without them actively seeking it, very different than the difficulties that Nottingham-based drag performers face in obtaining paid work. Earnings for Manchester-based performers are usually both higher and more common than reported by Nottingham-based performers and are reportedly given such financial opportunities without the performer directly facilitating that paid work.

Participant 3 M in their reflection referenced earlier[33] reveals a familiar embodiment of the autonomous neoliberal subject who, by believing their financial success is entirely reliant on their determination to work, fails to acknowledge the many obstacles that several performers encounter. These discussions are furthered by considering similarities between Manchester- and Nottingham-based performers' continued self-investment. Several Manchester-based participants revealed that, much like Nottingham-based performers, they felt a pressure to self-invest in their drag aesthetic since audience expectation has been driven by the drag public *RPDR*:

> You have to constantly buy something new because if you are seen wearing the same thing even twice, you won't be taken seriously. People have higher expectations of drag now because of *Drag Race* and that means you have to live up to those expectations, even if it's very expensive- which it always is (Participant 5 M).

Yet, as has already been evidenced, performers based in Manchester (of those interviewed) often earn more for their performance work and have more frequent access to paid work than the majority of those interviewed in Nottingham. Therefore, these costs of self-investment are not only easier to afford but they are also easier to justify since the initial cost of investment is usually returned and it even increases the chance of profit. The extent of this contrast is highlighted specifically by Participant 3 M:

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[33] Found on pages 131.

> I recently decided to insure all of my drag materials: my wigs, all of my custom outfits, shoes, make up, the whole thing. That material is worth thousands and so it was important to me that it was covered, I have worked so hard for it so I want to keep it safe – at any cost (Participant 3 M).

Not only does the participant highlight their financial security afforded to them through their drag and that they can afford such costly materials, but they are also financially secure enough to protect their own investment through costly contents insurance for their drag materials. This stands in contrast to the performers interviewed in Nottingham who often struggle to afford such materials, let alone invest in its insurance. In these ways, the financial self-exploitation of Nottingham-based performers I have evidenced in this chapter does not apply to those performing/operating in Manchester.

6.4) Conclusions

The wider UK drag industry has altered drastically (being re-shaped to fit the standardisation enforced by drag publics and the ongoing globalisation of the drag form). The factors that have worked to create these changes have also significantly engineered correlating shifts in performers' occupational and artistic operation and mentality (through the shift in social and occupational logic that reflects and speaks to neoliberal ideals of individualism and competition within local labour markets). Because of these changes, the markets and neoliberal ideology now associated with drag on the local level have permeated the personal and social lives of performers in varying ways which each work to destabilise their financial, occupational, and personal wellbeing. The drag industry and wider drag publics that inform and re-shape that industry, in addition to the regional lesser-metropolitan level of Nottingham's drag scene with its limitation of opportunity, persistently encourages performers to become entrepreneurial subjects who seek to cement their presence in its local economic and social hierarchies.

Whilst this might be argued to be a way for performers to follow a neoliberal narrative and overcome their historical marginalisation, it is the very scene that calls for this overworking and overcoming of financial, societal, and personal obstacles that refuse to supply them with the opportunity for this success. The regional setting rewards performers for this work and reputation building with low pay and infrequent opportunities for drag work. Where this work does exist, it is a terrain for competitive undercutting and community rivalry. Therefore, in their search for reputational and financial gain, reflecting their need for engagement in reputation and social economies, and through their own enacting of individualism, performers often further marginalise their fellow drag community members, becoming themselves subject to the very hierarchies that seek to oppress and minoritise them. In subjecting the quality of their mental health, artistic work, and social/personal lives to the

ideals that neoliberalism perpetuates participants reaffirm how 'politics, deliberation, and public action dissolve under the relentless pressure for leveraging one's self into a position of greater human capital and competitive advantage' (Rodgers, 2018, 84).

It appears that drag performers, since they evidence an intrinsic merging between the personal and occupational (in drag personae) selves, are more susceptible to the forms of identity conflation that neoliberalism encourages. The occupational selves of performers promise greater reward than through the development of social relations and community-building within their local scene. Thus, performers' everyday-lived identity *and* drag persona (which are already intrinsically bound to one another) become the idealised subject of the surrounding market. It therefore goes without saying that 'for better or worse, the world of drag is changing, and fast' (Zaslow, 7, 2022) and with it, the occupational and personal lives of performers are also being forced to shift and adapt to the current tide of drag's mainstreaming in neoliberal contexts.

Chapter 7

Insta-Drag and Entrepreneurialism

Arguments and discussions prior to this chapter have been centred on the operation of drag performers in relation to their *physical* lesser-metropolitan location of Nottingham. These arguments have sought to explore how this geographic specificity steers and affects that performers actions, whilst investigating the current and changed state of the night-time economy and its associated queer scenes. Further investigations highlight how performers' socioeconomic contexts, in Nottingham, inform their performance practices, perceptions, and rates of "success" within their local drag entertainment industry. Evidently these discussions have also highlighted shifts in global, national, and local drag industries alike most of which have been catalysed by drag's recent globalisation and its increased visibility. It has been argued then, that these developments have helped to strengthen drag's ties to neoliberal practices, since the economic and social ideals which have been presented to steer drag performers' operation within such communities, run parallel to the ideals of neoliberal subjectivity. Moreover, this work has so far considered how these contexts govern performers' experiential lives *outside* their drag work, drawing parallels between the new drag industry landscape and the ways in which neoliberal ideologies infiltrate all aspects of a subject's life, including the occupational, the social *and* the personal. This chapter, however, attempts to steer these discussions in a new yet closely linked direction. It seeks to shift this focus from the *physical* setting of Nottingham to the virtual setting of online social media platforms. I argue that Instagram is utilised as an avenue for entrepreneurial opportunity by local performers to enhance their position in both the attention economy (through enhancing both their virtual and real-life reputations) and the financial one (by promoting and building their distinctive drag-brands). I will illustrate how this utilisation is encouraged not only through Instagram's platform architecture and its inherent links to neoliberal ideals, but also through performers' precarity due to the scarcity of opportunity/financial stability that Nottingham's local queer scene provides.

Instagram, founded in 2010, is a notable social media platform that promotes the online sharing of image-based content and is currently 'one of the most widely used [platforms] around the world' (Inan-Eroglu and Buyuktuncer, 2018, 941). This and other social media platforms, provide researchers with free access and the opportunity for great insight into a wide range of individuals and their respective communities. Quaan-Hase and Sloan reflect Instagram's importance through the following statement: 'interactions and engagement on social media are often directly linked to [...] events taking place outside of it' (2017, 3-14). More specifically, the nature of such social media platforms has been identified as pivotal in the neoliberal function and shifts of global drag industries, evidenced clearly in

Lingel and Golub's study on Brooklyn (New York) and the sociotechnical practices enacted by its local drag communities through Facebook (2015). The work of Feldman and Hakim additionally explores the role of social media in the cultural 'celebrification' of drag cultures (2020). Therefore, using ethnographic methods to investigate drag performers' utilisation of social media platforms feels necessary to the focus of this thesis since 'Instagram is currently the dominant platform for drag [performers]' in current contexts where 'an active social media presence is increasingly regarded as essential to the making of a contemporary drag career' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 394).

This chapter details the ontological reliance of local drag performers on social media (particularly through their Instagram presence), highlighting their embodiment of neoliberal entrepreneurial attitudes to assist their physical drag work and bolster their virtual and physical reputations. This virtual engagement grants performers new opportunities for work further afield that are otherwise lacking in their local night-time economy, providing them with a chance to remain competitive in those local, oversaturated drag markets. The chapter also investigates how through these promotions of the self in virtual settings, the drag performer (in some cases) also undergoes a kind of transcendence from drag performer to blooming social media influencer.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of Instagram's platform architecture, exploring the inherent links to neoliberal ideologies evidenced by its promotion of curated imagery and links to both the monetary and social economies (7.1). This is followed by a revised version of the peer-reviewed study published during the research stages for this doctoral project titled 'Entrepreneurial 'Insta-Drag': An Analysis of Nottingham Based Drag Performers' Social Media Profiles' (Ditch, 2021) (7.2). Initially utilised as a preliminary scoping study for this project's participant involvement, this article addresses how performers utilise Instagram to develop and exert entrepreneurial self-branding in lesser-metropolitan areas and the role of location (or regionality) in drag performers' expressions of neoliberal subjectivity through those virtual settings. The article makes several observations on performers' varying online successes and the factors that potentially influence them, using an approach that engages with 20 Instagram profiles of Nottingham-based drag performers (some of whom were included in this project's overarching interview dataset and some not) through a triangulation of data analysis methods. The third discussion section of this chapter will benefit from the data obtained through the project's ethnographic interview datasets, developing the preceding discussions to understand the ways in which drag performers are socioeconomically affected *through* these ongoing engagements with social media (7.3). All of this is followed by the chapter's concluding section (7.4), which draws these arguments together.

7.1) Instagram as A Neoliberal Tool: Convergence of the Visual, Social, and Attention Economies

Instagram promotes the uploading and editing of captioned visual content, which is published on individual profiles to create a feed of dated and curated content that is specifically tailored by the user for their audiences. Prior to investigations of local performers' use and virtual engagement with this platform, it is imperative to first raise discussions around the social platform's inherently neoliberal architecture. This first section justifies and contextualises the focus on Instagram within this chapter by investigating these links to neoliberalism and how they situate the platform as a convenient site for drag performers to utilise alongside their methods for self-branding. Recent data highlights that, at the beginning of 2020, Instagram had 'in excess of two million monthly advertisers' and '25 million business profiles' (Mahoney, 2022, 519). Therefore, the sheer international scope and omnipresence of Instagram (especially in Western markets) is undeniable, creating opportunities for businesses to market themselves. What concerns this project, though, is how Instagram creates business-centric opportunity for its individual users. Whilst arguments around the use of social media more generally might determine that *all* social media platforms exemplify a neoliberal drive to direct, market and condition its users' as human capital, I argue that Instagram lends itself to neoliberal subjectivity more directly than other social media platforms. Therefore, Instagram becomes a catalyst for the virtual and operation of local drag performers as neoliberal subjects.

The architectural importance of visual content creation by its users to Instagram's function, the platform speaks directly to concepts of the neoliberal visual economy. The prominence of visual content as a social sharing function evidences this, since it is the 'politics of looking that permeates Instagram as a visual platform' (Mahoney, 2022, 521) and its promotion of transactions through that content. Likes, shares, comments and the reposting of others' content all qualify as forms of virtual engagement, which serves as the currency of Instagram's visual-centric economy since these forms are 'essential for [users'] visibility' (Mahoney, 2022, 522). These affordances of Instagram demonstrate a 'relational potential' between the boundaries of social media-based technology and its users' 'social response to it' (Smith, 2021, 609), or simply put between a platform's features and its users' outcomes. Therefore, those affordances give great significance to the level of engagement that users' content elicits in relation to the value of their human capital. Through the inclusion of captions and hashtags within these posts, Instagram also allows users to 'offer normative prompts as to how the image should be understood, to brand themselves', and users can therefore more easily 'monitor the success of this branding through the accumulation of likes and comments' (Mahoney, 2022, 520-1). These forms of virtual engagement become an indicative signifier of audience appreciation and recognition for users, therefore allowing them to generate further social capital and online content.

The links between the virtual function of Instagram and the assimilation of its users into these varying forms of social and visual economies is then clearly represented, beckoning them to critically consider the worth and use of their human capital transactionally.

Not only does the platform promote the *creation* of visual content through its infrastructure, but it also encourages users' specific curation of that imagery through forms of editing to ensure users' content fits with the narrative and/or brand they want their Instagram profile to showcase. This kind of editing and image curation might be completed using editing software such as the widely popular FaceTune app (often associated with Instagram and its promotion of beauty-related content/photographic self-portraits). This app promotes the perfecting of facial features and even body shape/appearance through, for example, smoothing and reshaping features. The architecture of Instagram itself even offers users with options to 'crop', 'resize', and 'apply a filter' to their content (Mahoney, 2022, 520). Instagram therefore guides 'users to present images of themselves, their lives, their interests that contribute to a stylised and curated account of themselves' and consequently provide them with 'the tools to curate the version of themselves that they would like to be appreciated as by others' (Mahoney, 2022, 520). Consequently, through the promotion and endorsement of self-reflection and specific editing, Instagram users become ever more entangled with neoliberal subjectivity. By manipulating their audience's visual consumption and therefore associations with them through their profile, users highlight their 'commitment to the endless work on the self', which is inherently required for the neoliberal subject (Mahoney, 2022, 521-2).

This inevitably echoes discussions made throughout this thesis based around local drag performers' attempts to build reputable self-brands to remain competitive in local attention and financial economies. Social media generally encourages users to situate themselves as a form of commodifiable product, or as a business enterprise, through their utilisation and considerations of human capital. Instagram clearly demonstrates a new avenue for the marketing of a performer's self-brand by offering opportunities for curated content sharing, with the promise of enhancing their audience-base and reputation alike. Therefore, 'in its capacity to document neoliberal subjectivity' in these ways, the social media platform becomes a direct 'tool of neoliberalism' (Mahoney, 2022, 523) especially in its blatant perpetuation of users viewing the self as a brand and commodifying their online efforts.

The scale of Instagram's role in the perpetuation of these ideals is however unsurprising. The app/platform's role has arguably shifted from maintaining a primary focus on furthering public communication and connectivity, to one that is more interested in aiding capitalist marketing and advertising industries. This renders the use of Instagram as 'less an open space of communication and self-identification than a place for exhibiting and curating' the neoliberal 'self' (Flisfeder, 2015, 555).

The platform thus partakes in cementing the importance of both the visual and social economies alike. For Instagram, as a social media platform, this large focus on advertisements becomes both problematic and complex. Advertisements on Instagram, due to the interface of the app itself, appear as regular posts on user's feeds making it more difficult for its users to determine which posts are advertisements and which are social posts from user profiles. The only differentiation here is that a small "sponsored" caption appears above these posts and sometimes contains a hyperlink to the product/service that is advertised. Through this near-seamless integration of advertising into user feeds, Instagram's architecture works to explicitly blur the boundaries between advertisements and users' social media content. Instagram additionally creates new avenues for advertisements that work towards this blurring, including its "Instagram Stories" feature. This is a feature that distinguishes their advertisements from other social media platforms: 'because every media source is almost saturated by advertising messages, firms try to find new ways to address their public' (Belanche et al., 2019, 70). This feature refers to the sharing of ephemeral content, which only remains for 24 hours, and is used by advertisers and individual users alike. Whilst individual users primarily use this feature socially, 'advertisers present their ads within' the feature which is only marked by an 'advertising' caption on the 'top left of the screen' (Belanche et al., 2019, 70). This method of advertising then becomes both a 'salient and innovative' way for advertisers to influence a 'shopping decision process' (Belanche et al., 2019, 70). The platform additionally shows an evident dedication to showcasing these forms of advertisements to users since, as it has been observed that as 'many as 1 in 4 posts are ads' (Gesenhues, 2019).

Whilst this focus on advertising through Instagram's architecture provides some insight into its prevalence as a marketing platform rather than a social one, it is the influencer culture it feeds which grounds this claim. Influencers are known to influence those 'who follow their communication, behaviour, and presentation' and this large 'base of supporters […] identify' with them in some way (Vodak et al., 2019, 149). The role of the influencer has thrived in the last decade and has coincided with a popularity boom of social media outlets, such as Instagram. This has offered 'a playground for neoliberal subjectivation with a move towards an entrepreneurial influencer self' (Iványi, 2023, 649), encouraging users to create free content to solidify a respected place in influencer and attention economy hierarchies. The oversaturation and high visibility of such influencers across social media platforms represents the 'individual or collective internalisation of the spirit of competitiveness, ideals of pleasure and consumerism' which materialises through platforms like Instagram in 'patterns of sharing online content representing an internal conformity to "optimising", "realising" or "mastering" oneself' (Iványi, 2023, 649). Despite their popularity, the occupational stability of a virtual influencer is very precarious. They must find new and original ways to differentiate themselves in oversaturated

markets 'where value is generated by the appreciation of brands —branded objects, services, or people' alongside 'the "viral" circulation of such appreciations on social media platforms' (Doorn, 2014, 364). The figure of the influencer, as in earlier discussions around drag performers within this thesis, becomes parallel to the neoliberal entrepreneur. The role of the neoliberally ideal entrepreneur is presented 'as one who "can stand on his own feet", is "made for success", "destined to win", and is a "winning type"' (Iványi, 2023, 654) implying that influencers are responsible for their own success (or failure). Notions of competition are then closely intertwined with the role of both the influencer and those wishing to achieve influencer status, once again asking users to invest in their own human capital and differentiate themselves from others in the influencer market. This in turn, provides interesting parallels between social media influencers and the role of the entrepreneurial drag performer as my discussion in earlier chapters also indicated.

The concept of prosumption provides an interesting lens to further consider Instagram's perpetuation of neoliberal ideals and behaviour in influencer culture. This theory clearly defines that the practices of consumption and production intertwine in digital spaces therefore opposing previous sociological discussions which suggest that these practices should be explored separately instead of being considered as overlapping. The links between the notion of prosumption and social media's neoliberal function have been well documented by scholars such as Flisfeder. They articulate how the notion of prosumption, 'a confluence of production and consumption', is clearly replicated in users' utilisation of social media platforms such as Instagram (2015, 553). This is especially applicable here since Instagram users, through their creation of online data by sharing visual content that works towards neoliberal subjectivity, produce a form of 'prosumer commodity' (Flisfeder, 2015, 555). The prosumers, in this case the Instagram users who are either digital influencers or seek to influence while gaining audience growth, thereby investing heavily in their own human capital. This continued investment into and production of social media content, alongside the audience influence it provides, gives them a potentially significant role in the success and/or failure of retail markets that they themselves hold no stake in. Seeking reward from the visual economy socially and/or financially, the influencer/prosumer's role suggests that social media outlets like Instagram have 'become a platform for the performance and presentation of a commodified self' (Flisfeder, 2015, 554). The concept of prosumption on Instagram situates influencers in wider commercial landscapes. They employ virtual methods to entice audiences into following their online presence, creating synonymous links to companies and brands, whilst benefitting financially and reputationally from their own online activity. This employment, as I will argue later, is replicated in ways by local drag performers. These virtual efforts require a total commodification of the self and self-exploitation of their human capital through a myriad of 'physical and psychological factors' which 'can be a source of future income' (Flisfeder,

2015, 555-6). In these ways virtual prosumers/influencers then become 'no longer the subject of exchange but of competition' (Flisfeder, 2015, 555-6), positioned against other peers in these competitive markets in their personal development of platform-based economies and social capital.

The architecture of Instagram also provides influencers/prosumers with opportunities to signpost any paid content they disseminate by adding a "paid ad" caption to their post and links to the advertising brand's page. Funded by brands/companies, influencers will create adapted and guided content which promotes that same company/product to *their* audiences. The idea of advertisement and the self-commodification of users' human capital is then raised every time a user wishes to post. It becomes increasingly evident that Instagram is aware of the profitability their platform catalyses and therefore endorses the prosumer commodification of its users. Instagram continues to cement its promotion of this kind of self-commodification and associated self-branding as highlighted by influencer culture, by presenting users with opportunities to boost their shared content through in-app transactions. Through these paid boosts Instagram offers to share a user's post by altering its algorithms and showing it to audiences that are likely to engage with the user's style of content based on their existing audience-base and the hashtags that the user has placed in that post's caption. Users indicate a length of time to boost their post, with a positively correlating increase in cost. An algorithm can be defined as 'a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer' (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). Instagram utilises these algorithms to disseminate certain kinds of content to users' feeds and not others, and these are notoriously hard for users to navigate. Therefore, through this transaction users are not only exploited through Instagram's power to determine these algorithms and therefore how far a user's social reach/engagement goes, but further exploited since they are then expected to pay for ways to navigate around that same architecture. In these ways the platform feeds on the power that the visual economies which it helps to facilitate holds, beckoning users to invest into their own online social success. The company then not only profits directly from the advertisement opportunities it presents to companies for the promotion of their products and services, but also from its individual users.

Instagram provides an interesting site of convergence between the visual, social and attention economies. This same convergence permits and beckons the platform's users to consider their human capital in entrepreneurial and business-centric ways, endorsing their motivation to grow reputations through online audiences/followings. It provides new ways for advertisers to promote their product/brands, not only through its dedicated advertisement features but also by capitalising on the influencer market it facilitates. Globally, 'more than 50 million people now consider themselves to be influencers' (Gagliese, 2022) and it is platforms like Instagram with their ever-increasing entanglement with capitalist markets and advertising, that have catalysed this. Users strive to gain influencer and/or

micro-celebrity status and therefore utilise Instagram as a platform for self-commodification and the perpetuation of self-branding efforts. In these ways the platform demonstrates how users' online activity in corporate social media becomes a form of prosumption, which is simultaneously disguised as a form of 'leisure activity' (Flisfeder, 2015, 559). This disguise seeks to obscure how Instagram's promotion of individual prosumption, which remains 'a form of exploited and alienated labour' through its competitive and scarce promise of financial/social reward, working 'toward the transformation of nearly all activity into value-producing activity' (Flisfeder, 2015, 553-9).

Therein Instagram provides a suitable site of convergence between multiple economies, for drag performers to move their physical and geographical efforts to build reputation and solidify recognition of their brands to a virtual space. This is encouraged through false promises, which indicate a dedication to advertisement markets and users' self-commodification through its platform architecture and its catalysing of influencer culture alike. These cultures promise to reward local performers' online activity through its constant endorsement of entrepreneurial behaviour. This is all achieved whilst disguising itself as a social media platform built for social connectivity and leisure, a disguise for its neoliberal and business-centric function. I articulate here how the supposed reward of engagement with Instagram and its perpetuation of self-commodification neatly aligns with the altered industry of drag (discussed in earlier chapters) and its endorsement of neoliberal ideals. The geographic location of Nottingham (and therefore of lesser-metropolitan areas) with its lack of socioeconomic support for LGBTQIA+ communities, makes social media platforms like Instagram (and the transactional image economy it facilitates) more enticing to local drag performers. They utilise the platform in business-centric ways that work to develop their own self-brands and better situate their positioning in local competitive markets[34].

Local performers are invited to re-shape themselves into the form of blooming influencer, entering new (for them) virtual spaces to gain the rewards of influencer culture and the visual, social and attention economies Instagram cultivates. This provides them with the illusory promise of new income streams through building their brand identity and its audience, something which is even more tempting given the economic instability that their drag performer occupation provides to them (as discussed earlier in the thesis). Local drag performers already demonstrate many of the characteristics resonant with both the neoliberal entrepreneur and the social media influencer. Instagram simply provides a new avenue for these demonstrations in virtual spaces. Thus, the term "Insta-drag" might be coined, referring to the utilisation of Instagram by drag performers as another avenue for financial and social gain.

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[34] This will be further explored in section 7.3 of this chapter.

7.2) Drag and The Employment of Virtual Entrepreneurialism

As previously stated in the introduction to this chapter, this section endeavours to continue discussions around drag's cultures and their inherent ties to neoliberalism through explorations of lesser-metropolitan performers' use of Instagram. The previous section sought to address *why* Instagram establishes itself as an ideal site for performers methods of marketing and self-branding due to its inherent neoliberal focus on advertising. This section interrogates *how* local drag performers utilise the platform entrepreneurially, by isolating and categorising the entrepreneurial methods that they employ.[35] This qualitative analysis explored 'how drag performers utilise Instagram and how these utilisations might be deemed [as] entrepreneurially charged' whilst forms of quasi-quantitative data analysis based around data such as follower counts, likes per post, comments per post etc: 'offers insight into how often these utilisations occur and give indications of what might lead to differing "success" rates of performers' (Ditch, 2021, 4).

The analysed datasets were synthesised to establish four main categories that, demonstrate specific types of entrepreneurial attitudes being employed by drag performers through their Instagram profiles and virtual presence. These categories are: (i) self-marketing and self-as-brand, (ii) marketing of others, (iii) marketing and showcasing personal talent, and (iv) mixing of private and drag identities' (Ditch, 2021, 5).

Figure 3: Primary Categories and Performers Representing Them

Identified Primary Categories Related to Entrepreneurial Attitudes	Performers Identified Who Have Displayed This in Some Form
Promotion of the Self-Brand	[All Performers]
Marketing of Others	1, 8, 11, 12, 13
Showcasing Personal Talent	[All Performers]
Mixing of Private and Drag 'Identities'	5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14

(Figure 3)

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[35] It draws on a paper published by the author of this thesis, which initially acted as a scoping study for both the overarching project participants and thesis discussion focuses (Ditch, 2021). Despite its original intention this paper's inclusion in this thesis aids these chapter discussions since it provides insight into how local performers further their entrepreneurialism, as previously discussed, into new virtual settings to aid their self-brand and reputations. Therefore, this peer-reviewed publication has since been revised and developed for its contribution to this thesis. For this section, 20 participant Instagram profiles were analysed in detail through forms of image-based and text-based latent content analysis (see Chapter 3: Methodology for more detail). These forms of analysis were used to categorise the employment of entrepreneurial tactics and methods by drag performers on Instagram. It should also be once again drawn attention to here that the sample population/performers referred to in this section (7.2) are different to those referred to in the rest of the thesis and therefore 'Performer 1' here does not relate to the 'Participant 1' referred to in all other areas of this project.

Qualitative data analysis in this section allows us to explore *what* entrepreneurial methods are enacted/employed by local performers. This shows how performers are driven by forms of internalised neoliberal ideologies which result from changes in the drag industry, the socioeconomic contexts of Nottingham, and the widespread accessibility of social media platforms in the current period. Simple descriptive quasi-quantitative analysis helps to corroborate these findings, whilst also allowing us to infer *how* successful these methods are in terms of their social reach.

Several social media analysts working in fields that assess and interrogate the use of platforms such as Instagram, argue that engagement rates are the upmost important metric when assessing users' success regarding their social reach (Ken, 2014). As per Chacon, these rates are calculated in the following equation: [(All Comments, Likes, Shares) / (Total Followers) X] (2018). However, whilst engagement rates can provide useful information, they aren't fit for this study's purposes. This is since the performers that hold the highest engagement rates in the dataset also have the lowest potential social reach (since they have the lowest total followers). Consequently, for this thesis' analysis the total follower count of an individual's profile is considered as the prominent factor in assessing performer's online success, a metric also regarded as highly important to assessing the extent of users' online success by some social media analysts (Jin et al, 2019).

Figure 4: Performers' Instagram Engagement Rates

Question	Lowest Engagement	Highest Engagement	Numerical Difference
Total Instagram Followers	19 (Performer 17)	86844 (Performer 5)	86825
Average Likes Per Post	4 (Performer 17)	938 (Performer 5)	934
Average Comments Per Post	1 (Performers 4, 10, 16, 17)	51 (Performer 5)	50
Total Engagement Rate	2% (Performer 1)	21% (Performer 17)	19%

(Figure 4)

(i)   Self-As-Brand

The first category to be examined is 'Self-As-Brand', comprising of several subcategories exploring examples of self-marketing and self-branding enacted by performers through their use of Instagram. This category is a dominant one isolated in the dataset since all performers were 'found to exemplify the utilisation of posts for building and sustaining self-brands associated with their drag personae' (Ditch, 2021, 6). This thesis has attempted to demonstrate how performers employ specific methods to remain competitive in the local drag industry and how these methods align with the neoliberal ideals of self-branding. The term self-branding is known as a process where individuals, such as the performers discussed here, develop 'a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital' and thus become parallel to 'commercially branded products' since they benefit 'from having a […] public identity that is a unique selling point' or is 'responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences' (Khamis et al, 2017, p. 191). Through the consistent recognition and promotion of their established and growing drag brands through engagement with Instagram, performers clearly demonstrate a business acumen and further solidify their work primarily as a product with transactional value.

The first subcategory isolated is performers' explicit promotion of their events through posting marketing material on their Instagram profiles, as exhibited by five of the performers. All five performers posted (in some cases several times) advertisements for live events that they were hosting/participating in as evidenced by Performer 1: 'Ultimate Drag Race Quiz, hosted by [Performer 1 Name] at Bar No 27' advertised alongside the necessary '£5 entry' fee. These posts which explicitly include promotional material, show performers' engagement with self-branding as they position themselves as a type of attraction to build interest around their reputation and the local venue holding the event to acquire profit from ticket sales. The performer uses promotional material as an 'attention-getting device' to 'achieve competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace' (Khamis et al, 2017, 195). In this way, the performers attempt to cement their place in local Nottingham-based economies where the 'capacity for commercial relevance sits within increasingly dominant economic realities' and opportunities for booked work are scarce (Khamis et al, 2017, 200-1). Yet, as already discussed in previous chapters, this relatively small fee will most likely never benefit the drag performer themselves, since performers in Nottingham are largely paid a (usually unfair) standard fee per event. Therefore, through these advertisements the performers might not be simply seeking monetary profit. Instead it appears that they hope for return within the social economy through the means of social entrepreneurship and reputational growth. In promoting their material, they not only increase perceptions of professionalism around their brand (for surrounding hosting venues therefore heightening their chances of further employment) but also work towards greater audience reach

through their content creation. As performers and venues simultaneously compete for consumers, recognition, and visibility in Nottingham's night-time economy the potential for profit offered by social media platforms becomes enticing for both performers and the venues they operate within). Yet, through performers' combination of self-promotion and the promotion of local venues in these ways, the individual takes on a kind of brand ambassador role for those venues. It is highly unlikely that these social media posts are paid for by the venue, and so the performer takes on further free work. This form of self-exploitation is enticed only through the promise of greater audience reach made through Instagram's architecture. Whilst we might presume performers can economically benefit from events such as these and therefore benefit from aiding its marketing in a virtual capacity, these events are usually sites of unsustainable earnings for drag performers especially in lesser-metropolitan areas (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 391). Instagram therefore acts as a site not only for content curation, but for the exploitation of performers' human capital.

The following subcategory is the performers' use of branded advertisements through brand/product links within posted content. In this way, the social content curated and disseminated by performers resonates with notions of the 'micro-celebrity' which describes 'ordinary people' whose following is not large enough to deem them to have a true celebrity status, yet 'use social media to build fame' (Usher, 2020, 171) and influence. Performers 3, 5 and 14 all have published Instagram posts that showcase their make-up artistry whilst listing products used in the caption section, ensuring that the brands who create those products are tagged: '@makeupobsession X @tiffany Kaleidoscope Palette'' under the subtitle ''products:'' (Performer 3). Posts like these draw clear parallels to the online engagement of beauty influencers on the platform, who also 'make obvious notation of products (and the creator company) that are used to create make-up focused pictures' (Ditch, 2021, 7). These types of posts are defined by Johnston as 'advertorials' which refer to posts that clearly include 'branded content that fits into the influencers' [...] narrative' and slots 'effortlessly into their feeds' (2020, 510). Whilst these examples show no evidence of being sponsored by the tagged brands, the performer nevertheless promotes and advertises their beauty products similarly to marketing campaign content that the brand would create and post themselves. The posting of advertorials is a commonplace trend across the platform and in the creation of branded 'image, text and tags', the individual acts as a free marketing tool as they virtually embody the 'aim of selling consumer goods' for those (often large-scale) companies (Usher, 2020, 173). It should be noted that there are several potential benefits and motivations for the creation of these advertorials for performers, to entice large-scale brands with large followings to repost the performer's content being potentially the most prominent. This reposting would potentially increase the performer's visibility and therefore help to grow their audience and social media reach, whilst transactionally the company/brand themselves promote the

reliability of their marketed product cheaply through the performer's free content. This non-monetary transaction is important in this context, since Instagram's platform architecture promotes the individuals' need to present and situate themselves as marketable product within economies that utilise both social currency (in comments, likes, and shares) and forms of economic currency simultaneously (Marwick, 2015, 142).

These posts then clearly articulate how 'the human brand' that is established and furthered through these virtual settings by performers can easily become 'synonymous with' corporate brands, cementing the integral nature of social reach on Instagram as 'self-branding [which] makes most sense' when users 'lend their names profitably to major brands' (Khamis et al, 2017, 193). The focus on advertising product also relates to discussions found earlier in this thesis, around the problematised notions of higher investment equated with a higher quality of drag. Consequently, this echoes earlier concerns around how 'platforms of self-expression' like drag performance 'become commodified' through self-marketing, which in this case is exacerbated by Instagram's virtual architecture since it easily lends itself to idealising neoliberal notions of the entrepreneurial self (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 389). Once again, the likelihood of these reposts occurring and obtaining recognition from these large-following brands is low due to a 'media surplus' of drag-based content competing to be showcased and therefore audiences and brands alike 'are saturated with so much to choose from' (Khamis et al, 2017, 195).

Performer 9 was noted to have replicated this style of advertorial, sharing an image of themselves whilst wearing a custom pride badge created by an independent Nottingham-based company, tagging them accordingly. Differently to the previous discussions around beauty product advertising, the advertising of this product suggests a social objective in raising LGBTQIA+ awareness alongside supporting the regional economy and the community that drag performers are representative of. In promoting locally branded products with this social underpinning, the performer embodies characteristics aligned with influencer authenticity. Current debate around this term illustrates that 'compelling narratives potentially attract audiences' for reasons such as being 'inspirational' and having a sense of relatability (Khamis et al, 2017, 196). Through this post, Performer 9 'conveys pride in their queer identity through donning and promoting the LGBTQ+ badge' and in promoting it to audiences who already follow them (and are then more likely to be interested in LGBTQIA+ scene/culture since they already have an interest in drag), they narrow advertising focus to narrower and more appropriate audiences. This heightens the chance of sales' for that local company (Ditch, 2021, 8). For the performer, the post becomes an admirable display of social motivation and here authenticity 'becomes a commodifiable endeavour that galvanises the attention economy' and

contributes to 'a presentational culture that values the promotion of the self at its most accessible' (Johnston, 2020, 509).

Analysis of participants' social reach statistics is useful here in assessing the success of performers in relation to the frequency of content posting. Performers 3 and 5 (who have the highest follower counts) 'have an average time between posting of 2-3 days' whilst Performers 16 and 17 (those with the lowest follower counts) 'have an average time between 7-14 days of posting content on the platform' (Ditch, 2021, 8). These differences suggest the importance of regularity when posting content for heightening a profile's social media reach and therefore online success. This corroborates existing advice for social media users: 'It's generally recommended to post at least once per day […] on Instagram' with a bare minimum recommendation of 'at least once a week' (Myers, 2020). This frequency of posting reflects the need to form habits, that stipulate regular posting should become part of performers' routines for the reward of audience engagement. This dependence on regular content creation/engagement with Instagram reflects how the success of self-branding on social media is reliant on and sustained through 'consistency, distinctiveness and value' (Khamis, et al, 2017, 196). Consequently, through the persistent and regular uploading of drag content to their Instagram profiles, performers entrepreneurially steer their self-brand into virtual settings in hopes of increasing audience engagement and therefore help to build their reputations on and offline.

Through their use of self-branding through Instagram engagement, the performers in this category show how in virtual settings drag is 'transformed' into a space 'of and for commercial enterprise' (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 387). Additionally, they become entangled in the attention economy, desperately attempting to 'attract eyeballs in a media saturated, information-rich world' to 'increase their online popularity' (Marwick, 2015, 138). In these ways, Instagram opens a new stream of economic opportunities and expenditure in an industry that struggles to support them.

(ii)   Marketing of Others

This category is less dominant in the dataset, with only 5 performers using this method, and it represents the marketing of drag-based peers local events through Instagram. The most notable subcategory is the posting of images that include other performers as collaborators. All examples of this provided detailed information on how to access and find the performer's collaborator. This level of promotion helps to reaffirm academic discussions on the importance of 'community' which is documented as inherent to the social importance and practice of drag performers especially in lesser-metropolitan areas (Knutson et al., 2018, 42). It achieves this by promoting one another's profile on

their individual posts and to their separate audiences which (despite some level of potential audience crossover) therefore aids a performer's increase in visibility and social reach. This can be argued to share some similar properties with earlier discussed notions around authenticity and relatability, since it strongly evokes sense of community and potentially even friendship. It is through these characteristics that their methods might be interpreted to be forms of 'performing authenticity' to 'heighten one's status' (Johnston, 2020, 509) and consequently increasing likeability amongst audiences, which through this method also has the potential for significant growth.

This technique of social media collaboration is a widespread strategy used by several influencers (between both influencers themselves or influencers and brands) across the platform, since it easily and quickly allows for the significant development of virtual audience following increases that are synonymous with influencer culture. Whilst some scholars argue that this commitment to authenticity is 'hard to maintain during the process of constructing branded personae' it is in this 'new media society' where 'economic imperatives and authenticity co-exist in a complex way' since it provides users such as those discussed with another way to 'differentiate' their 'self-branding on social media from that on other platforms' (Liu and Suh, 2017, 13-4).

A less frequently trending subcategory in the dataset is the 'showcasing of upcoming events by other performers that do not include the participant themselves' (Ditch, 2021, 8). Performer 1 is the sole exhibitor of this, when they shared a poster for Trinity "the Tuck" Taylor (an ex-*RPDR* star) who appeared at a local nightclub in Nottingham. Once again, this might elicit the sense of community which is so integral to the creation of queer safe spaces in spaces of both art and cultural production, therefore appealing to queer audiences and building an impression of reputability and friendliness around a performer's drag brand. Additionally, in their promotion of a local event showcasing a globally renowned drag celebrity such as Trinity, Performer 1 draws 'attention to the local scene as it imbues the city with a sense of "worth", which may draw attention to Nottingham's drag scene and perhaps even introduce larger audiences which would be beneficial for performers within that small community as it would most likely increase opportunities due to heightened demand for drag performance in the city' (Ditch, 2021, 8-9). Linked closely, is the smaller subcategory of performers who boastfully and publicly post their photographed in-drag meetings with such international superstars in professional settings (such as those of live performances), as seen in 3 posts by Performer 8 who is pictured alongside three different *Ru-Girls*. This once again draws attention to the local performer's "worthiness" of audience respect, following, and social capital as they perform alongside such reputable and widely appreciated performers, helping to establish a kind of 'professional proforma for which the purpose is primarily the perpetuating of consumer culture' (Usher, 2020, 175). These instances are paradoxical to the more collaborative examples discussed earlier in this section

(as with collaborations between local performers), since these examples instead act almost like a CV for the local performer addressed to both audiences and event places, increasing the sole performer's chances of bookings due to both impressive and therefore competitive experiences.

(iii)   Marketing and Showcasing Personal Talent

The third category identified, encompassing examples from all 20 individuals in the dataset, is the explicit virtual marketing of the self-and through showcasing of the performers' personal talent. This is arguably the dominant category identified given that over 90% of all posts (200) analysed for this study highlighted. The most common example identified are posts that include photographic self-portraits of the drag performer, commonly known as 'selfies': 'an image that includes oneself' usually created 'for social media' (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Most of these images were taken close to the face of performers, with an evident focus on the make-up focused artistry created by the individual, in a way explicitly highlighted by Performer 3 who adds to the caption of a selfie: 'another shot of this look but without all the fancy lighting so you can see the makeup better'. The curation of these images might perhaps be viewed as a direct form of 'identity construction' through 'strategically inspired image control' which places 'emphasis on the atomised distinct self' of performers (Khamis et al., 2017, 200-01). It should be noted that these images also showed evident signs of tampering through image-editing software such as blurred skin, high contrast colours, and filters. In editing these images with such specific attention to aesthetics and notions of perfection, performers highlight a keen attention for detail when it comes to the promotion of their drag brand.

By controlling the content that is shown through their Instagram, performers indicate not only the importance of social media in their work, but also that they are highly conscious of how to curate, edit and construct their drag brand. Through the focus on such skills and in creating specifically curated emphasis on the quality of their drag artistry, the performers 'attempt to aesthetically distinguish themselves and their content from similar content on Instagram' (Ditch, 2021, 9). Therefore, arguments around the 'commercialisation of social media and [its] users' are validated since these examples highlight how social media has a direct effect on users' 'motivations for participating in specific practices and forms of content generation" (Feldman and Hakim, 2020, 387). In these ways the performer attempts to justify their recognition through rewards of social currency, through their content which taps into appreciations for the beauty industry (Ditch, 2021, 9-10). These claims hold further resonance when we consider them alongside earlier discussions of brand-linking/promoting within posts as 'Instagram is a platform that is based on visual aesthetics and filtered images, which makes it a suitable ecosystem for promoting beauty products' (Jin et al, 2019, 567). The reliance on

and curated visuals and imagery, alongside the promotional and neoliberal ecosystem of Instagram as a digital platform with the high regularity of both selfies and advertorials, awards performers with a kind of virtual omnipresence (Marwick, 2015, 141). Clear parallels can then be drawn between Instagram-using drag performers and more typical social media influencers, who also 'monetise their appearance' (Jin et al, 2019, 569). The social profiles of performers then become virtual repertoires of their self-brand, used to demonstrate their work and its worth to audiences and even for potential employers. This claim seems is cemented by Performer 3's insistence on tagging the location of 'Nottingham' in every self-portrait posted, instantly communicating their geographic location of their drag activity to entice other event organisers and employers in the sector.

Performers 3 and 5 who have the highest audience following 'appear to have a strong focus on close-up selfies that capture and highlight makeup skills, usually paired with links to branded product' and 'every post assessed (10 each) by both performers was found to predominantly corroborate this' (Ditch, 2021, 10). In sharp contrast, Performers 16 and 17 (who have significantly lower follower counts than Performers 3 and 5) only had five posts each that focused on makeup artistry with only 3 of those detailing the cosmetic products used for their work. These differences demonstrate preferences towards cosmetic-centred content from audiences since there is a correlation between beauty-focused imagery and higher interest/engagement from their audiences. This development is unsurprising especially since, in 2020, content related to beauty-industry held 11.1% of all Instagram interactions (Iqbal, 2021).

In previous chapters, the importance of outfit creation and specificity was identified as being particularly important to performers and the establishing of their self-brand. The following sub-category, the posting of full body images which highlight performer outfits, speaks to these findings. It should be noted that while make-up focused imagery was more commonly found, visual examples of entire drag outfits and fashion skills of performers were also evidenced. In some cases, performers have even created these looks by hand and shared this information in post caption sections, like when Performer 12 stated that the dress they have photographed themselves wearing was made 'by hand' and in another post they wear 'hip-pads made by moi' that includes a link posted to their independent business page that sells hip-pads to other drag performers. This performer in particular 'crosses into several types of influence as they are not only creating content to appeal to audiences already interested in drag and therefore increase their social popularity, but also draw attention to their own independent-business venture and therefore increase their own economic capital' (Ditch, 2021, 10). Through the conduction of these business centric methods on Instagram, 'the self-negotiates the personal [which is the art of drag here] and professional [the economic venture of the performer] before a mass audience online' (Johnston, 2020, 509).

The final subcategory isolated that is of interest to this discussion is the local performers' uploading of their own video-recorded live performances. There were only four examples of this found, yet they are especially notable when considered in the context of the pandemic they were created and published in. At the time of this study, in-person performances were not permitted to take place due to social distancing guidelines as indicated through governmental pandemic guidelines. This led to an influx of live performance recordings being shared on Instagram as most examples of this found were after these guidelines were enforced in April 2020. Two examples of this recorded content were filmed in 'what looks to be the bedroom and house of the performer whilst in drag and another performer had filmed in what appeared to be a derelict building' (Ditch, 2021, 10-11). Performer 13 in their recorded post, has recorded themselves performing in front of a green screen which had been edited to show images of planets colliding to further enhance the artistic concept of their 'space-age' outfit. Therefore, the virtual setting of Instagram opened new opportunities for the individual's performance and facilitated new ways for their audiences *viewing* their performances. These performances demonstrate how performers create opportunity for performance and further the virtual promotion of their drag brand. Furthermore, in finding new ways to showcase their drag to online audiences during the pandemic, performers promote their brand in an opportunistic and self-motivated way: 'self-branding through social media can be understood as a way to retain and assert personal agency and control within a general context of uncertainty and flux' and therefore harmonise 'with neoliberal notions of individual efficacy and responsibility' and the need to overcome (Khamis et al, 2017, 200).

(iv)   Marketing and Showcasing Personal Talent

The final category relevant to this discussion, refers to the 'evident mixing' of both drag-based content and content 'that relates more closely to the private life of the performer' through Instagram use (Ditch, 2021, 11), as evidenced by six performers. This method of self-branding/marketing resonates with earlier discussions of drag performers' virtual presence and its links to authenticity capital and celebrity/influencer culture. For microcelebrities and celebrities alike, as Ilicic and Webster argue, 'celebrity brand authenticity is introduced as a construct that represents consumer perceptions of celebrities being 'true to oneself' in their behaviours and interactions with consumers' (2016, 410). In the first subcategory identified here, clearly evidencing the use of authenticity as a virtual marketing tool, is the mixing of both drag-based posts alongside posts clearly demonstrating the performers' everyday lived identity through their Instagram profile feed. These feeds evoke the idea of ordinariness for audiences around the performers' otherwise (usually) larger than life drag-brand. The effect of this ordinariness 'is key to the success of an influencer/micro-celebrity's brand' (Ditch, 2021,

11). Several posts from Performer 9 represent self-portraits (selfies) that reveal and draw attention to their everyday lived out-of-drag body and identity. In presenting imagery that identifies the huge differences between the drag-self and the personal-self, both aesthetically and characteristically, the performer draws attention to the impressive transformation that they are talented enough to undertake.

Additionally, the subversion of heteronormative gender identities, which is linked closely to the heart and history of drag, are celebrated through this self-awareness, celebration of transformation, and the breaking of heteronormative binaries. Therefore, we might assume that the performer not only appeals to audiences who enjoy the transformative and aesthetic splendour that their drag delivers, but also to those who rate drag's social importance and potential for subversion so highly. Through this evident highlighting of two identities on the visual platform, the performer reflects how drag is considered to 'represent a type of gender expression that is not necessarily tied to […] a person's core gender identity or sexual orientation' (Knutson et al, 2018, 33). This, in its celebration of this, almost imbues their work with an academic quality since it corroborates debates linked to the forms of gender/queer studies which articulate the complex nature of such subversions and identity politics. Thus, the performer demonstrates their actualised queer self in their endorsement of such politics and non-heteronormative thinking. Furthermore, the performer here demonstrates how authenticity acts as a crux for reputational success since 'consumers value celebrities when they actually are who they appear to be' and that 'being oneself in terms of creating an image of individuality, uniqueness, and differentiation' is greatly appreciated and beneficial to those seeking heightened reputations (Ilicic and Webster, 2016, 410-11).

The final subcategory here demonstrates how performers published collage-style photographs which clearly highlight the process of drag transformation by showing both the 'before' and 'after' of a drag look (Performer 9). Like the above examples the performer appears more self-aware in their focus on transformation, they more directly attempt to 'gain recognition from the work that is undertaken to transform into their drag persona' in addition to the 'talent' and 'time' needed to 'undertake such transformations' (Ditch, 2021, 12). Moreover, through revealing both their drag branded personae *and* their seemingly everyday-lived identities to audiences, they capitalise on a state of vulnerability that the neoliberal subject produces as authenticity. By permitting audiences into their personal lives, the performer demonstrates that they too (like audiences) have a more 'authentic' state of being (Ditch, 2021,12), these actions therefore represent the importance of being 'relatable' for audiences to appear more 'trustworthy' and therefore promote future social media engagement and increase reputation (Jin et al, 2019, 570). Performers have evidenced here an awareness of creating content transactionally, that successfully advertises and enhances their drag brands. Their persistence in

carefully curating and editing such content, suggests their transactional motivation to create content that attracts audience engagement/recognition on a social media platform where 'comments, likes, and shares function as social currency and social reinforcement' (Marwick, 2015, 142).

Throughout this investigation I have worked to draw attention to the entrepreneurial actions of drag performers on virtual platforms such as Instagram, motivated by the promise of both greater audience appeal and the cultivation of further engagement. These reflect the characteristics of neoliberal subjectivity, specifically regarding the importance of a strong business acumen and need for growth/success that we now understand as vital to the success of drag performers in local to lesser-metropolitan areas. These actions have been indicated as attempts 'to open economic and social opportunities both within the platform of Instagram' (through paid content/advertisements etc.) and 'in the physical world' (such as promotional material for live events, growing audience numbers, and building geographically local reputations) (Ditch, 2021, 12). These demonstrations of entrepreneurial tendencies highlight the power of the attention economy. This economy drives such artists to engage with platforms such as Instagram to solidify their relevance and increase the potential for paid opportunities in their local drag scenes. This is achieved through 'their continuous engagement with aesthetic imagery, and practice of marketing through that imagery', as 'the drag performers discussed here directly place themselves as marketers within this attention economy, with the hopes of obtaining social, cultural, and economic currencies' (Ditch, 2021, 12). These are currencies which their local drag scene and its associated night-time economy scarcely provides.

7.3) The Occupational and Social Effects of Performers' Social Media Dependence

This thesis has thus far evidenced how the occupational lives and general operation of performers local to and working in lesser-metropolitan areas such as Nottingham, have been directed by drag's changing industrial landscape and its inherent links to neoliberal subjectivity. Their use of social media platforms such as Instagram to build upon their existing efforts of self-branding, which therefore invites a closer involvement with notions of the neoliberal self, works also to affect their operation as performers. This has been highlighted through the previous sections of this chapter which have sought to address Instagram's intrinsically neoliberal architecture and local performers' use of the platform to further their self-branding efforts. Performers have been identified as using several social media engagement methods to both cement and improve upon their position in the financial and reputational hierarchies within their respective drag scene. This section, however, seeks to investigate the *effects* of these on performers. These explorations have been categorised thematically into social

media's influences on the occupational lives of local performers (7.31), and *outside* of their occupational lives (7.32).

7.31) Performers' Occupational Lives

All performers interviewed for this project explained that their occupational success as local drag performers was almost completely dependent on their social media profiles (primarily Instagram profiles): 'You can't be a drag performer who earns and supports themselves without using Instagram: fact' (Participant 7). These dependencies are associated primarily with performers' concerns over being booked for paid work opportunities within their local night-time economies: 'Instagram is very important; I wouldn't have had any of the gigs that I have had without it' (Participant 2) and 'I have a huge dependency on social media for people noticing me and for securing future gigs' (Participant 5). Instagram, through its widely entangled web of profiles comprised of both users and businesses/companies, provides opportunistic means of social connection between local performers and potential employers. This is directly addressed by Participant 9 who claimed to use their Instagram profile 'exclusively as a kind of booking system' where they can make 'points of contact with companies and businesses in Nottingham'. All performers discussed, in some way, how they intentionally utilised Instagram as a business tool with which to network with employers. Some performers went so far as to view their Instagram profiles/activity as a form of live professional CV, which aids   their efforts in seeking physical employment: 'for me it is both a diary and a CV for people to engage with and to know what they are hiring' (Participant 13) and 'I see my Instagram as a portfolio to advertise my drag brand' (Participant 12). By treating their Instagram profile as a functional CV or portfolio, the performer consciously furthers their attempts to solidify and communicate their self-brand to the multitude of other platform users. These curated profiles allow them to 'construct and promote a consistent, marketable, and ostensibly authentic self-image' which they then use 'to develop relationships that can be leveraged for economic opportunities (Whitmer, 2019, 3). In these ways, performers are business-centric in 'instrumentalising affective relations' that social media platforms such as Instagram afford, displacing social connectivity for neoliberal networking solely for 'the process of developing a reputation' at a larger scale than in their physical local drag scene (Whitmer, 2019, 3).

In addition to supporting performers' financial interests through the facilitation of event bookings on the platform, Instagram is used by performers to promote their independent business ventures *through* their drag accounts. This is articulated through the posts of Participant 8:

Instagram gives me the opportunity to post advertisements for my own business to my audiences free of charge, and I post that alongside my regular content and my promotion for shows and events. It almost acts like a bridge between that gap between influence and performance, I guess. It feels like the two are becoming more intertwined. That idea of influencers and drag being intertwined I mean, and I guess I benefit from that both in being a drag performer but also as an independent business owner (Participant 8).

This promotion and open advertisement of their personal independent business ventures furthers the blurring of lines between drag performers and influencers. This is especially since the performer utilises their online audience to seek financial profit not only from their performance work but also from their marketable product. These actions even begin to replicate the ways in which Instagram intentionally disguises its advertisements as regular content, since they are frequently posted between other regular content made by the participant. The performer here then becomes a neoliberal subject, investing in their own human capital whilst also 'seeking to maximise' their prospect of 'long-term commercial profit' (Feher, 2009, 27) not only through their drag brand but also through marketing their independent business. In utilising Instagram for multiple streams of advertising that is related to their drag brand, performers' 'asynchronous self-presentation' is 'akin to a premeditated display of virtual artifacts connoting social and symbolic capital than an unfolding social performance attuned to reacting others' and engaging in friendly communication (Whitmer, 2019, 5).

For these performers then, Instagram is subverted from a tool that prioritises social connection to one that is used for transactional purposes. One might argue that the intrinsic social aspect of such social media is severely undermined and even manipulated by performers' attempts to capitalise on its markets. Performers simultaneously engage in social media activities whilst placing their brand at the forefront of their motivations for online activity and their cementing of online presences. Ultimately, performers here demonstrate how the 'nature and structuring logic of Instagram' cements their selves as 'an ideal tool for users to document and be acknowledged for performing', through neoliberal traits of 'self-determination, entrepreneurialism, competition, and meritocracy' (Mahoney, 2022, 521). Whilst some performers appreciate the social connectivity that Instagram provides them with, they almost conflate this with the perpetuation and building of their drag brands: 'I rely on socials for communicating with followers and fans and that is the pure reason that I have it, so people can follow what I am doing and come to my shows or book me' (Participant 15). Participant 15 celebrates having a platform for communication yet associates that communication with the commercial interests of their drag brand, highlighting an imperative to heighten their reputational success and therefore benefit their economic prospects.

However, the reward of such occupational bookings and therefore for financial return are reliant to the online success of performers on platforms like Instagram, especially regarding their level of social reach and audience following. Another dominant motivation for social media engagement across the participant dataset was for performers to improve upon their audience and reputational growth both virtually and physically, or IRL, in their local drag scene, an implication that platforms like Instagram and their perpetuation of influencer culture frequently make. Participant 3 even states how they believe that 'the sky is the limit with social media, and you really can become a superstar from your bedroom'. Whilst there is mostly a positive correlation between these motivations and their effect, since several performers indicated how their social media use has improved their reputational success. Several participants indicated that after committing to the persistent creation of online content centred around their drag brands/personae, their online audience began to increase: 'recently my Instagram has kind of blown up and that happened pretty quickly for me […] even in the space of one month I've gained over 2000 followers and that level of reach can only happen on Instagram' (Participant 2). They go on to regard this type of audience following as 'detrimental' to their drag work since they represent paying audiences, stating that 'they simply couldn't do drag properly without it' as 'that's how we get booked' and 'as funny as it sounds, the more following you have, the more bookings you get' (Participant 2). The participant here addresses the opportunities for quick audience growth that social media platforms like Instagram can provide, whilst endorsing its efficacy in rewarding them with greater audience followings which in turn positively correlates with higher chances of employment in physical settings. Thus, the importance of the visual and attention economies to the success of performers in lesser-metropolitan contexts is once again evoked through the economic opportunities that platforms such as Instagram provide.

Yet, this straightforward online growth that Participant 2 reports is not an experience that is corroborated by other performers. Participant 1 states how the process of gaining online audiences is one that is difficult to navigate: 'I rely on social media a lot, especially Instagram, and don't get me wrong I have built a very good follower base on there, but that took a long time, and it really wasn't easy'. This account, in stark contrast to Participant 2, is congruent with recent academic debates that emphasise the difficulty of obtaining followings through individuals' exploitation of human capital and exertion of time and effort in pursuing such rewards in social media settings. Bellavista, Foschini and Ghiselli argue that for users, 'gaining audience in social medias is a difficult and time-consuming activity' since 'being able to differentiate their own work' becomes 'even more challenging in social media environments, that count millions of other person[s] doing similar activities' (2019, 2). For some performers, such as Participants 10 and 14, these rewards of online activity are significantly less. Despite still developing an online audience base through Instagram content creation, Participant 10

had grown a following of 294 and Participant 14 had accumulated a following of only 297, which are the lowest follower bases of the entire dataset. Both participants had been actively operating their Instagram profiles for over a year. I do not intend to criticise nor deem this as unsuccessful. It suggests that despite Instagram and alternate social media platforms' unsaid promise of reward for content creation, for some local drag performers those promises are unreliable. Questions are then raised over why some users' audience followings increase rapidly whilst others do not. We might then ask ourselves: what determines successful audience engagement on platforms such as Instagram for local drag performers and what is it that makes it difficult for performers to achieve those kinds of engagement?

The changing algorithms that partly construct Instagram's architecture (previously referred to in this chapter), and their power to prioritise and disseminate certain content over others, provides an interesting lens to work towards answering these questions. Instagram is known, since 2016, to run on 'algorithmic market-style metrics that influence the popularity of content posted to the site' (Mahoney, 2022, 520). Mahoney furthers this discussion of Instagram's use of algorithm metrics by stating that it uses 'three "ranking signals": relationship (users are more likely to see posts from an account that they have previously engaged with), interest (users are more likely to see posts of the same type as those that they have interacted with before—e.g. posts tagged as "fitness" or "feminism") and timeliness (more recent posts appear at the top of users' feeds)' (Mahoney, 2022, 522). Some performers indicated that they had difficulties negotiating these algorithms, whilst others appeared to have become more comfortable with navigating them. It appears that performers' ability to navigate these algorithms through their content creation are those who are also more likely to have a faster growing audience base and increased online reach.

Participant 11 stated that they learned to be more knowledgeable about Instagram's algorithms and how to work around them, finding that: 'the more frequently I posted, the more looks I did, creating daily content, I would get more likes and follows that would ultimately get me seen'. Participant 2 echoes this need to become tech savvy enough to comprehend and work around Instagram's technological construction further:

> There's a whole set of unsaid rules and things that you have to overcome and calculate when you use Instagram in this way. For just a quick example, me and my best friend were looking at a queen and they uploaded a photo without a green screen effect which is really popular to do now and it only got 2000 likes I think. Then they uploaded one *with* a green screen filter and it got like 10,000. So we went through as many performers Instagram posts as possible and nearly all of the ones without green screen filters were really low in likes and everything else was really high. I think that started to make it really clear to see how one tiny little effect changes the entire algorithm of Instagram. It is similar with the grain filter and my Instagram too, if I use the grain filter then my likes increase sharply too because of it. Then I became

much more invested in how to manipulate that algorithm to work for me, finding out what time of day is better [to] post, posting regularly and usually several times a day, finding hashtags that increased the reach of my posts, posting content that feeds into wider trends but with my drag look for example. My drag has become better since I started to click about this, and so has my pocket linings. I have also paid to boost my posts a couple of times, but I try not to do that too much though. Learning to navigate Instagram, it took me two years but I think I've finally got the algorithm down, and that is the secret to doing well I think (Participant 2).

Participant 2 here embodies so many characteristics of the neoliberal subject. In trying to learn and navigate around the architecture of Instagram, they worked to become a more multi-faceted self with further transferable and desirable skills. They hold Instagram's algorithmic metric system accountable for social success on the platform, so much so that they realised manipulating it has left them in a better position both financially and reputationally. In this way, Instagram becomes comparable to 'pay per win systems' where algorithms 'decide the user experience' and if 'users use promotions, they immediately gain visibility' and 'if they are not willing to spend money, then they will have to produce many posts, interact a lot with other users and see a lot of advertisements to compensate [for] the situation and be able to grow in popularity' (Bellavista et al., 2019, 2) therefore creating a large form of investment into their human capital through their time and effort. Contrastingly, Participant 4 states that despite 'keeping track of how their posts do' and 'trying to figure out ways of making them do well', they ultimately struggle to keep up 'with the demands of Instagram'. They even felt that if they 'could work out how Instagram works' then they would be 'much better off' financially (Participant 4). It should be noted that there is also a significant difference between the follower counts of both profiles, with Participant 2 having about 175% more followers than Participant 4. It is suggested that having an algorithmic knowledge of Instagram, understanding what and how to post content for engagement, is partially detrimental to one's social and economic success on such platforms. For those willing to dedicate themselves to the platform and understanding its changing workings, Instagram appears to reward users by promoting their content to other users. But without this dedication to overcome the technological tribulations Instagram's algorithmic systems establish, users' content becomes swallowed in oversaturation of media that the platform holds and indeed beckons more of.

Instagram can be said to provide some forms of economic opportunities for its drag performer users, but only if they are willing to undertake a type of transcendence into influencer culture, and work towards becoming a multi-faceted and technologically savvy user and undergo complex-entrepreneurial self-development. Otherwise, performers are at risk of being unable to benefit from the opportunities that Instagram appears to offer to them. It unfairly promotes content that it

determines to be more interesting, and as Participant 9 alarmingly states: 'Instagram in a way preserves a drag performer's fame and gives them the opportunity to survive. In the years to come people will begin to fade if they don't start pushing further for their reach on social media, however necessary'.

7.32) *Outside* of Performers' Occupational Lives

Earlier parts of this thesis addressed the infiltration of neoliberalism into the changing drag industry which had in tandem begun to steer and alter the social and personal lives of local performers in a range of ways. The near-constant entrepreneurial use of social media platforms such as Instagram catalyses infiltration of neoliberal subjectivity more deeply into their personal and social lives in other ways. This section seeks to explore this infiltration and the effects of the use of entrepreneurial social media on performers' lives *outside* of their occupation as drag performers. This discussion will also further interrogate *why* performers are dependent on this use of social media, by closely looking at the socioeconomic conditions they are surrounded by. I argue that the entrepreneurial use of social media is detrimental to performers' social lives both mentally and physically.

The overwhelmingly dominant example of how the entrepreneurial uses of Instagram directly affect the personal lives of performers is through the creation of new pressures and expectations that social media places upon them. Whilst earlier chapters in this thesis have addressed the pressures and expectations that the changing drag industry has forced upon those constructing it, the continual use of social media introduces new pressures and challenges for performers. Some performers indicated that their use of social media burdened them with a 'constant feeling of pressure' making them feel 'awful', which was congruent with the scale of their 'audience following – as that is how others always perceive you' (Participant 4). Further discussions echoed that most of these forms of pressure had 'grown' from an 'obsession with gaining a certain amount of likes or followers etc' (Participant 6). Therein lies one of the problematic effects of the attention and visual economies that social media platforms work to both curate and benefit from. Through the high level of social significance attached to its forms of social currency, Instagram encourages users to promote themselves through the continued use of its social platform. It posits users as both workers and as active subjects who must make 'rational choices' to engage in forms of 'competition with others for access to scarce resources' where 'wages' are replaced by the promise of a 'return on investment in one's human capital' most commonly through its embedded forms of social currency (Flisfeder, 2015, 556-7). These pressures take two main forms: (i) to keep up with content creation consistently and regularly, and (ii) to compete with other performers in these virtual settings.

Performers indicated that they felt pressured into creating content on Instagram, despite an evident distaste for it, since it was so intrinsic to their financial success within their drag scene: 'you have to really make sure you maintain your profile and keep posting, even though I hate it, because if you don't you won't survive. And it really can be quite tiresome creating [content] for social media, and you feel like you constantly have to engage with it and plan it' (Participant 11). This sense of fatigue, suffered through the ongoing entrepreneurial use of Instagram, is very much echoed by all other performers within the dataset. Participant 2 effectively demonstrates this:

> 'There's always so much to do and think about when it comes to social media, it's mental. For me, Instagram feels like an entire other full-time job that I have to do. I can't get away from it but that's the way it is. I do it when I first wake up, and I am usually doing it when I go to sleep super late. I even end up doing it on my breaks at work. It actually has, many times, caused a rift between me and my partner' (Participant 2).

It is this sense of fatigue which results from the near constant promotion of the self-brand that so closely relates to the pressures on the neoliberal subject. Social media can even be said to catalyse a specific form of addiction which, due to the form of social currencies involved, influences users' feelings of self-worth and therefore an 'overuse of social media may cause psychological distress and self-concept objectification' (Wei, 2021, 179). It is important to consider then, as Wei states, that it is 'social media's initial mission to addict users to earn profits' even if this invites a development of 'severe psychological problems' (2021, 179).

In Participant 2's case, this debatable form of addiction has not only become an inescapable chore but has also interfered negatively with their personal relationships. This dependence and/or addiction in many instances elicits little reward for performers, as indicated by Participant 9: 'this kind of dependence on social media and the pressure to keep active on Instagram, to post on your feed, to comment and to keep active, it isn't like it's that rewarding, especially given how many hours we put into it'. The self-exploitation of performers' own human capital then becomes increasingly more evident, as these examples signify how social media actively 'promotes the ideals of democracy' by apparently enabling all its users to build social success whilst 'actually reinforcing stronger forms of capitalist exploitation and control' by actively hindering that success which is already made so scarce due to the saturation of its media content and number of users (Flisfeder, 2015, 554).

Whilst social media already manifests these types of issues for general users, drag performers might be said to be even more at risk of suffering with them. This is through Instagram's potential exacerbation of their already complicated relationship with identity politics by demanding that they invest more into their human capital and consequently further heighten their dependence on social

media platforms to do so. The worrying current socioeconomic conditions of Nottingham and its queer scene situate its local performers in an even more pressured setting, where, through its scarcity of financial opportunity the use of social media (despite being the root of several issues socially and mentally) becomes ever more essential to their financial survival. This heightened demand for self-branding and neoliberal subjectivity 'thus encourages workers to be continually working at and promoting the self, ensuring the worker is always "on," leveraging their personality and lifestyle in the pursuit of producing branded value', something which is necessary in contexts such as these where 'building a reputation is necessary to remaining relevant' and 'self-promotion is non-negotiable' (Whitmer, 2019, 6).

Performers also feel pressures around the need to compete with other local performers in these virtual spaces which in turn also effects the determination of their own self-worth and the worth of their brand. The term 'polished' referring to a high standard of content, was used 34 times in the dataset, which consists of fifteen participants. This infers a pressure to create a higher standard of curated social media content to establish competitiveness. Yet, by encouraging users to 'produce strong brands that remain consistent,' Instagram's efforts to enforce ideals associated with a self-branding discourse 'ignores the situated quality of the self' (Whitmer, 2019, 7). This is since 'living up to that ideal is impossible, and when branding themselves on social media, workers risk irrelevance, invisibility, and discreditation' (Whitmer, 2019, 7).

Participant 5 clearly indicates that the use of Instagram for drag performers, becomes increasingly entangled with notions of quality and self-worth: 'People don't want to see imperfect, they want to see perfect and polished' and 'that then influences you as it makes you think "Is this what people want? Am I coming across how I need to?"'. The performer clearly demonstrates their active cognisance of audience awareness in this example, where the performer articulates that their content is curated specifically to do well with online audiences. Social media creates newfound expectations of drag performers on its array of platforms: 'social media creates completely unrealistic expectations, not just of people in general, but especially of drag queens' (Participant 11). These discussions are then furthered by the preoccupation that Participant 2 confesses they have developed around the quality of their social media content, which they then closely relate to their competitiveness in the local drag scene:

> I have become incredibly critical of myself and what I post. I have become obsessed with making the quality of my content better, by picking every post apart and figuring out what should be improved on. You become bizarrely concerned with very small details, how you edit, those kinds of things. And that is what gives you success, especially because everyone else does the same. And I have to say, when I think about it, it can kind of be a little depressing (Participant 2).

Participants have clearly demonstrated the mental hardships that their involvement with social media causes them. In their self-critique and ongoing social media fatigue, performers' use of social media to improve the worth of their brand articulates how the 'labour of self-branding' becomes an 'affective, emotional, poorly compensated work [….] under neoliberalism' (Whitmer, 2019, 7). This is especially highlighted when considering how the importance placed on self-improvement transforms, for some, into something more worrying such as forms of (body) dysmorphia and/or an overall decline of mental health which the statements made by Participant 2 above allude to.

Participants 7, 11 and 13 actively attribute a severe decline in their own mental health to their ongoing use of social media (namely Instagram) to promote and further their drag brands and careers. Participant 7 begins these discussions by highlighting how their involvement with Instagram exposes them to a heightened sense of self-critique, linking their increasing involvement with their feelings of depression:

> Looking at yourself for mistakes and what's wrong with you to change it is all that Instagram becomes for us, and if you don't post on it a lot then you are failing. But, at least for me, when you do post a lot, you also feel a lot worse. I have developed depression over the last few years, and whilst that might not be completely Instagram's fault, it really doesn't help. I need that following. I am creating a brand and I need to keep pushing that. But you really do get sick of seeing yourself all the time, and sick of constantly thinking about how to change yourself to compete (Participant 7).

Wei echoes these worrying effects of social media consumption suggesting how platforms like Instagram encourage users 'to compare themselves' with competitors, which in turn produces forms of 'anxiety' and an overall decline in the quality of their mental health (2021, 179). Participant 7 illustrates the damaging ideals that social media perpetuates, and, through their involvement, they become entrapped in its constraints whilst the quality of their mental health erodes. Performers even explained how the dependence on social media that their drag occupation requires left them feeling 'trapped within social media' even though it made them feel 'worse' (Participant 11) and even described their position as 'a slave to social media' (Participant 13). Once again, they reflect how the neoliberal subject is expected to place the business-centric motivations above their personal ones. This is achieved through a constant drive to develop their self-brand which in this case is undertaken through social media: 'social media and 24/7 temporalities thus speak to an environment of productivity that does not stop and in which profit-generating activity operates 24/7' (Flisfeder, 2016, 561). Wei notes how the symptoms of objectifying the self consists of users asking 'social media to testify' for them and 'judge people on how someone is evaluated by others' (2021, 180). The

importance of, and gratification earned from, the development of users' human capital through Instagram's affordances makes them more susceptible to these feelings. The interviews with performers work to corroborate these claims: 'There's a bigger conversation to be had I think about the psychological effects of social media and judging worth based on other people's glorified version. You become obsessed with that glorification, and it makes you feel like you are not good enough and you never will be' (Participant 11). This symptom of social media use 'undoubtedly increases the pressure of personal brand management and negatively influences the feeling of living a "perfect" life', illuminating clearly how the 'damage of social media' cannot 'be underestimated' (Wei, 2021, 179-80).

Participant 13 explains how this inflicts further blows to the quality of their mental health by furthering notions of personal dysmorphia:

> Over the last few years of making drag and doing it online, I've had a lot of issues with dysmorphia. You become so obsessed with looking at yourself on a screen, you kind of have two visions of yourself, you have your onscreen self and the one when you see yourself in the mirror. Those two things, a lot of the time for me, don't corroborate. I'm very aware that that's not possible. It's not healthy. In a lot of ways that comes from constantly comparing myself to others on Instagram. And even though I know it's doing that to me I have to keep going. If I don't my drag won't go anywhere (Participant 13).

The links between extensive social media use and the development of mental health issues such as body dysmorphia are well documented: 'social media exposure can worsen body image dissatisfaction, social networking site addiction, and comorbidities of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) such as depression and eating disorders' (Laughter et al, 2023, 28). Participant 3 echoes these debates, noting how their reliance on Instagram has led to such effects. Whilst none of the participants in the dataset expressed anything more severe than the above, these descriptions work to illustrate the significantly damaging effects of social media use in local performers. Performers here remind us that social media and its perpetuation of algorithmic ideals create forms of pressures and expectations that elicit further repercussions: since once we 'cannot achieve [these] expectations, it maybe not only decreases empathy, but also increases a sense of isolation and the risk of later depression, even strengthen[ing] suicide ideation' for some users (Wei, 2021, 179). Due to their lack of opportunity in local night-time economies, local performers in lesser-metropolitan contexts pursue the illusionary rewards of social media greatness to solidify the financial prospect of their work in the physical world, even if this dependence directly affects their happiness and/or quality of mental health.

Akram and Kumar in their investigation into the effects of social media use shows how social media can both encourage a 'potential breach of privacy' for users and make them susceptible to forms of

cyber-harassment (2017, 352). The dataset for this thesis speaks to these claims, specifically through examples of participants' issues with personal safety as a direct result of their ongoing use of Instagram. Some participants shared their issues around their safeguarding and personal boundaries and these help to further understand the personal implications of local performers' social media use. In the pursuit for online audience growth and increasing reputability, for Participant 9 this audience growth and online 'fame' has led to issues around their personal boundaries: 'I have had a lot of people, followers, fans, all overstep the boundaries on social media and edge into being intrusive. They don't just like, comment and support, they become almost too much, start leaving obscene comments or private messages and if they see you on the street, they think that they know you'.

This statement opens dialogue on several issues that the performer finds themselves subject to. Firstly, the performer raises how social media platforms and their comments/private messaging features through their intentions of social interaction, allow for audiences to more easily cross personal boundaries. Secondly, Instagram (alongside other social media platforms) becomes even more problematic since it encourages users to imbue them with more of their "authentic" selves which can sometimes provoke them to include some forms of sensitive or personal data (consciously or unconsciously) (Akram and Kumar, 2017) in the forms of locations, tags, etc. Akram and Kumar posit this as a notable 'drawback' of social networking since users might easily share data which might pose 'dangers to them' as even the 'tight security settings' of such platforms do not prevent personal data from being shared on 'social locales' (2017, 352). In some ways then, the occupational reliance on social media from drag performers not only potentially opens them up to the erosion of their mental health quality, but also in some ways jeopardises aspects of their privacy and even safety.

Participant 15 more disturbingly shares their experiences with negative personal effects of social media including detailed accounts of inappropriate messaging, forms of online harassment, and audiences crossing personal and occupational boundaries:

> As a drag queen, you open yourself to a kind of online fandom. But people are sometimes obsessed with this character. There is always that risk of opening yourself up to someone that doesn't understand that underneath [drag name] is actually someone else. So as much as I love drag and performing [drag name] is a job. Yeah, she is a character that is created that allows me to travel see great places make friends. But at the end of the show, she goes back into a suitcase. And then [real name] takes the reins again. There is a handful of times where there have been people that don't understand that, right? So they believe even though [drag name] has took the week off and the makeup off that I'm still her, so then they'll come to me or they'll see me, I don't know, maybe out in a shopping centre and they'll run over and demand a picture and I'm like, but I'm not [drag name]. And that to me, and as much as I appreciate the enthusiasm for [drag name] and what she does, there's a lack of understanding with audiences as to how they need to respect me. Just because they know me online doesn't give them a right to approach me in those ways. It's kind of an invasion of my privacy. But Instagram gets even worse than that. I've had pictures sent from men, straight men who

objectify me. I've had private messages from women married to straight men. Conversations that you wouldn't expect if that makes sense. I mean, if I worked in Waitrose, for example, and I then received an inbox from a customer, showing me everything that he's got because he found me attractive in drag. That's what you're subjected to as a drag queen sometimes. You can block them, but they will come back (Participant 15).

This account from Participant 15 offers a complex insight into the severity of such safety-related issues for local drag performers. They not only corroborate arguments made in previous chapters around the drag occupation being synonymous with the blurring of personal and professional boundaries, but also those addressed earlier regarding the unsolicited fetishisation of performers. Despite the implementation of some safety features, the architecture of Instagram bears the potential to situate local performers in uncomfortable and potentially unsafe situations with the audiences they work so hard to accumulate. This, in a way, is yet another implication of the neoliberal self's involvement in drag through the curation and perpetuation of drag self-branding through social media networks. When considered alongside the other examples given in this section, this stands as a convincing demonstration of the risks that local drag performers' social media dependence cause them. This dependence, which they have been burdened with as they become increasingly entangled with notions of the entrepreneur and neoliberal subject in the face of their difficult socioeconomic contexts, often rewards them with little else. Once again, this is due to the oversaturation of these platforms with competition, reflecting the issues raised earlier with reference to the expansion of drag industries both nationally and internationally. Local performers become evidence that 'managing oneself becomes a full-time job' that 'blurs the lines between professional and private life' (Flisfeder, 2016, 561). As Flisfeder argues, social media platforms such as Instagram 'allow for the extension of the workday beyond all available working hours' where there 'is no off-switch' for users and so the 'invasion of 24/7 temporalities become all pervasive' and with lasting effect on local performers as this chapter highlights (2016, 561).

7.4) Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to move the focus of this thesis away from the physical setting of Nottingham and its influence on the local performers who construct its drag scenes, to the virtual setting of Instagram. The architecture and construction of Instagram, as a social media platform solidifies it as a neoliberal force. It both beckons users to entrench themselves in its ideals and focus of self-branding, whilst it additionally profits from the attention and social economies it facilitates and acts as a convergence site for. This in turn, situates Instagram as a perfect site for local drag performers to employ neoliberal entrepreneurial tendencies and motivations. They utilise the

platform to employ several entrepreneurial methods in efforts to better situate themselves and their blossoming self-brands in their local scene and its associated economies. So much so that performers believe the use of Instagram is a vital and integral aspect of their drag businesses, acting as a primary stream to both network and secure future employment. Yet the promise of reward that social media platforms appear to promise, for many performers but not all, are scarce: 'there is no guarantee that the affective labour workers put into developing and maintaining their personal brands will be rewarded' (Whitmer, 2019, 6). Many performers instead situate themselves as a 'product of an unstable labour market which places the onus on individual workers to manage the risks of neoliberalism by taking an entrepreneurial approach to the self' for 'material gain' and to 'develop their social networks' regardless of the cost (Whitmer, 2019, 6), a cost which for many even jeopardises aspects around their very quality of life.

Whilst there are examples of local performers benefitting from the entrepreneurial use of social media, this audience building can be attributed to the performers' persistence in learning and therefore navigating around Instagram's tricky technological algorithms. Notably though, this is a skill that is beyond the grasp of many others. Where little success is found, performers are still faced with the negative implications of this social media use. These not only interfere with performers' personal relationships, but also their overall feelings of safety and even erode their mental health quality and personal privacy. This is a result of the virtual audience base they work hard to create. Here social media 'downplays' forms of an 'inequality endemic', where 'the pursuit of meaningful individual identity, autonomous forms of self-presentation, and processes of self-valorisation have come to function in an entirely different register' since for local performers their 'actual intent, content, or outcome matter little—what matters is that they are pursued, and ceaselessly, relentlessly so' (Whitmer, 2019, 6). The dependence on social media by drag performers enable them to overcome the issues that arise from it, should they become successful in the markets it builds. As ideal subjects of neoliberalism, they should become multi-faceted individuals with a range of transferable skills (including those that are administrative, entrepreneurial, performance-based, technology-based, etc.) in addition to simply being a drag performer if they are to survive in the sector. Mastering the art of social media engagement becomes yet another expectation of the local drag performer, a string to add to their bow, that once again has a considerable weight on their occupational and financial success in the physical world.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

> Everything that you have to do here in drag, it all leads you into a deeper hole. Money becomes king. Not your art or what you love about drag. Money. That's because you must learn to survive. You have to learn how to become a master of business. How do you not push yourself into a business mindset when you live and breathe your work twenty-four hours a day? It becomes your full-time business. You must always think about how you can innovate in the market around you, especially because that market fails to accommodate you. That becomes an even darker concept. Because then you're turning yourself into a full commodity and product. Even though I sometimes feel like I don't have the time to fully commit to a day job *and* do drag, you have to outstretch yourself so that your drag stays afloat. Even if I can't cope with having a full-time job as well, I have to because otherwise I wouldn't be able to survive on drag. Not here. Not in Nottingham at least (Participant 13).

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the understanding of socioeconomic dimensions within UK-based lesser-metropolitan contexts, particularly in relation to the experiences of local drag performers. Through an ethnographic approach, the research delves deeply into the interplay between drag culture and the specific socioeconomic challenges faced by performers in mid-sized cities like Nottingham. It not only celebrates the artistry and vibrancy of these performers but also critically examines the systemic barriers that shape their livelihoods.

The key arguments articulated in this thesis reveal that Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan status creates a unique set of socioeconomic conditions that place local drag performers in precarious financial situations. These conditions threaten their occupational survival through multiple channels: (i) a scarcity of local performance opportunities limits their visibility and income, (ii) an oversaturation of performers in a limited market intensifies financial competition, and (iii) performers often find themselves engaging in financial self-exploitation, compelled to invest in their careers despite facing meager and inconsistent earnings. This financial turbulence not only undermines their artistic motivation but also poses significant obstacles to treating drag as a viable sole source of income. Crucially, this thesis argues that the pressures stemming from these socioeconomic challenges compel local performers to adopt entrepreneurial strategies as a means of navigating their precarious circumstances. In embracing these entrepreneurial tendencies, performers internalize specific characteristics of neoliberal subjectivity, which profoundly affect both their professional and personal lives. This internalization manifests in various ways, including a heightened emphasis on self-branding, marketability, and the relentless pursuit of opportunities, often at the expense of their artistic integrity and well-being. By highlighting these dynamics, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how drag culture operates within lesser-metropolitan settings, revealing the

complex interconnections between artistic expression and economic survival. It also underscores the broader implications of neoliberalism within creative industries, illustrating how systemic economic pressures shape the identities and practices of performers. Ultimately, this thesis enriches existing scholarship by providing a comprehensive exploration of the socioeconomic realities facing local drag performers, thereby advocating for a more inclusive and critical discourse surrounding the cultural contributions of marginalised communities in the UK.

I illustrated the complexity of Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan socioeconomic dimensions through Chapter 4, indicating the historic de-queering of the city's night-time economy through the closure of its various independently owned queer-centric venues without replacement. This has elicited an increased demand for the limited spaces of queer safety, specifically in the night-time economy. Those spaces of demand have been opportunistically occupied by several corporate heteronormative venues who seek to profit from the void in Nottingham's queer night-time economy. Whilst such spaces work towards facilitating visibility and inclusion for the city's marginalised communities and provide limited forms of opportunity for drag performers to begin re-claiming Nottingham's eroded cultural "queerness", they simultaneously exploit those same communities. Nottingham's drag has become sanitised for wider audience consumption, with a disinclination towards alternative drag styles and a favoring of performances which closely resemble the recognisable stylistic characteristics of popular drag publics such as *RPDR.* This is a consequence of Nottingham's emphasis on combining queer and heteronormative audiences in such environments. Drive for profit encourage businesses to extend their audience reach by showcasing fewer subversive forms of drag and alternatively employing performers who are instructed to create palatable, commodifiable, and popular drag forms and styles that attempt to suit the cultural melting pot of both queer and heteronormative audiences their venues now attract. Chapter 4 also identified and addressed additional questions around the efficacy of advertised queer safety in such spaces, the authenticity of heteronormative venues' motivations around the support of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the low quality of pay provided for drag performers through those establishments.

Chapter 5 furthered these discussions by addressing how wider contexts *outside* of Nottingham's geographical focus, such as the recent globalisation of drag through the popularity and success of drag publics such as *RuPaul's Drag Race,* have transformed the landscape of the drag industry (locally and globally) to one that reconsolidates neoliberal values as norm. Unsaid criteria pertaining to the "worth" and "success" of a performer have entered cultural imaginaries, being closely correlated with performers' self-investment through their financial purchase of costly materials to improve the "quality" and therefore appeal and ultimately the profitability of their drag (custom outfits, wigs, etc.).

These criteria have been influenced through drag publics that help shape both audience expectation of local drag and the pressures that such expectations place upon performers. Such criteria infer that success for local performers is not simply built on financial self-investment through the expensive purchase of an aesthetic (by purchasing material goods). They beckon further investment into performers' human capital by determining that success is reliant on building multi-faceted skillsets (specific performance skills like "lip syncing" and "death-dropping", sewing, being comedic, etc.) that help performers build reputable self-brands and identify 'USPs' as tools for brand differentiation in competitive drag markets. In response to these new landscapes, performer motivations have shifted. Initial performer motivations are identified to primarily reflect creative and queer expression, where performers find enjoyment in their artistic work. Phenomenologically as the performers gain experience of a career in drag and begin to treat drag as a form of occupation, those initial motivations become intrinsically re-shaped by entrepreneurialism.

Chapter 6 investigated how the practices of local performers are steered by these nuanced contexts. It does so by exploring the strategies employed by local drag performers to entrepreneurially navigate around both the socioeconomic implications of Nottingham's drag scene *and* the changing landscape of the global and local drag industries that had been evidenced in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Performers' creation and maintenance of entrepreneurially charged self-brands is evidenced here through: (i) their carefully considered drag personae which is informed by an active search for local market knowledge, (ii) personal investment, (iii) proactive creation of new performance opportunities, (iv) a development of transferable skillsets, (v) obtaining multiple business streams, and (vi) utilising social interactions within the local scene as networking opportunities. This chapter furthered these discussions by investigating how performers' lives outside of that work are infiltrated by neoliberal ideology, arguing how for local drag performers the lines that distinguish the personal and the occupational are blurred. Discussions reveal that the quality of participants' personal and mental health are hindered through their engagement with local drag. This is catalysed through the high threat of homophobia and other forms of violence they face, a lack of financial stability, difficulties with identity conflation, and issues around their quality of mental health. Social aspects of participants lives are also altered through their occupation as local drag performers, including facing additional hindrances regarding dating and building personal relationships, and senses of community within the drag scene being undermined by the neoliberal competitiveness for occupational survival the scene establishes between performers.

Chapter 7 offered insight into the complex online presence of local drag performers on social media platforms such as Instagram through their ongoing pursuit of entrepreneurialism and financial and

occupational success. This analysis established, through focus on the virtual methods employed by local drag performers and the ontological presence of neoliberal characteristics in Instagram's platform architecture, that social media platforms offer local performers the potential for further streams of income, and it enables them to build upon the reputation of their existing self-brands. The economic vulnerability of performers situated in lesser-metropolitan scenes, and the desperation caused by the scarcity of opportunity and financial stability the scenes provide, encourages problematic engagement with social media. Performers become entangled with content creation on social media platforms that holds illusory promises of financial and reputational return within the attention, visual, and financial economies which their online presence increasingly entrenches them in. Labour through these platforms becomes a fatigue-inducing commitment for many, which in several ways also further affects both their occupational and personal lives and even potentially endangers their mental and physical safety. Whilst social media platforms are often utilised as successful booking systems for live events, the promises of reward through reputational growth in the attention economy through these further forms of labour are often unfulfilled.

Chapters 4 and 6 in their latter sections, prompted discussion around the local specificity of Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan drag scene. They did so through comparative analyses between Nottingham-based participant interview datasets and participant interview datasets from Manchester, which has a thriving queer scene and night-time economy supporting the communities that construct it. What emerged from these analyses, were socioeconomic similarities *and* major differences. Whilst performers from both cities share similar feelings about the precarity around performance opportunity and financial security, the scale and influence of these factors differs geographically.

Whilst Manchester-based performers perceived that building financial opportunity was also difficult and often unfruitful, they report considerably higher pay rates and higher frequencies of bookings than Nottingham-based performers. The biggest difficulty with finding local performance opportunity that Manchester participants reported was not being offered allocated stage time by the local council for their large-scale pride events. This establishes a stark contrast to participants from Nottingham, who work tirelessly to facilitate performance opportunities through networking and building local reputations. These efforts are then usually unrewarded, and if so, they are rewarded meagrely. Manchester was noted to have a thriving drag scene, with multiple event-spaces that regularly house drag performances and provide performer residencies. These opportunities better reflect the interest and demand of Manchester's local queer communities, than the relative lack of queer nightlife in Nottingham does for *its* communities. Several Manchester participants did acknowledge a sense of

personal privilege due to the wider array of financial opportunities that Manchester's metropolitan status provided to them, whilst reports of local performer oversaturation closely resembled the experiences of Nottingham's local drag market further complicating the accessibility of performance opportunity. Additionally, some Manchester participants stressed that both their initial and continued investment in drag had been returned, placing them in financially secure positions whereby their drag has now become their full-time occupation. Some performers even detailed how they were now financially able to insure their investments in their drag (outfits, shoes, wigs, etc.) Whilst there is overlap in the pressures identified as motivators to this investment between the two datasets, like the expectations placed on local performers by drag publics shaped by *RPDR,* stark contrasts between the metropolitan and lesser-metropolitan economic and performative realities are evidenced here. The financial self-exploitation of Nottingham performers, who invest in their costly drag self-brands despite a lack of financial return, differs from the financial and occupational success that most Manchester performers reported. This unforgiving financial cycle burdening those situated in Nottingham has, in most cases, meant that performers must work multiple jobs and even operate multiple businesses to perform their drag. The prospect of drag becoming a main form of occupation for such performers is therefore unlikely, with some even forced into retiring from drag due to its occupational and financial precarity. Whilst I am cautious not to disregard the difficulties that performers local to Manchester inevitably face, their interviews in several instances establish a difference between the severity of socioeconomic hindrances that their geographical specificity causes them by comparison to the lesser-metropolitan Nottingham.

The socioeconomic conditions of Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan status, in comparison to the metropolitan Manchester, London, or New York which are more commonly the focus of related research, puts its minoritised local drag performers in precarious financial and occupational waters. Nottingham's mid-sized city status and the proximity it consequently establishes between its performers should invoke notions of close-knit community building alongside a collective celebration of drag and the queer expression it is associated with. Yet, the local night-time economy within the city fails to support this sense of community amongst its local performers and instead enforces at atmosphere of neoliberal competitiveness. Despite having a rich history of extensive queer visibility through LGBTQIA+-centric nightlife, which established necessary spaces of safety for its marginalised communities, the city has lost a sense of queer visibility and celebration. Causes of this include a lack of local governmental intervention in both reclaiming these queer safe spaces and aiding their financial survival, despite an onslaught of high-cost urban renewal schemes in other public areas it deems more necessary. They also include the profitable opportunism from corporate companies which determines the survival and scale of queer nightlife existing within Nottingham. By capitalising

upon the local demand created by the city's lack of queer visibility and the national demand established through drag's wider globalisation through drag publics, these companies are partially responsible for the socioeconomic difficulties surrounding Nottingham's local drag performer communities. Donning temporary queer masks through the infrequent and superficial attempts to hold LGBTQIA+ events, whilst providing performers with limited forms of performance - and therefore financial - opportunity, these corporate institutions create further hindrances to performers through: (i) the infrequency of those opportunities, (ii) problematising the very nature of queer safety that is intrinsic to such spaces, (iii) providing low and unfair payment, and (iv) diluting the subversive tone of artists' work for increased appeal to queer and heteronormative audiences. Whilst the actions of local performers and their generation of new performance opportunities act as forms of queer activism and reclamation, these efforts are hampered by the problematic nature of the limited venues in which drag can exist.

Consequentially, Nottingham's drag scene becomes an environment concerned primarily with the cutthroat world of neoliberal competition, forcing individuals to grasp for financial and occupational survival in the economy hierarchies it becomes entangled with. Whilst performers are always expected to invest financially in their work, reflecting characteristics of the wealth effect, their work (for which opportunity is already scarce) is often underpaid and sometimes rewarded solely with the opportunity of "experience" or to build their "reputation". Through these complexities of self-investment, local performers then become financially self-exploitative since their work does not reward them with the stability and financial security it deserves.

Whilst these constraints have partially developed due to the drag industry's globalisation and the publics which carry it, Nottingham's lesser-metropolitan status and its contexts (as referred to above) exert further pressures on performers to compete and therefore exacerbate these industrial shifts. Performers seek to achieve financial and social survival through both the physical and virtual embodiment of neoliberal ideals and entrepreneurial tendencies, tactically employed to cement both their blooming drag brands (utilised as points of differentiation and "USP's") and therefore their position in the local social, attention, and night-time economies. Virtual platforms like Instagram provide false promises of reputation solidification/growth and economic return for performers. Yet, as performers detailed, this ontological reliance on social platforms and their neoliberal architecture is at times even resented by its performer-users: increasing risks of low mental-health quality and becoming time/effort strenuous, especially since its promises have only limited return.

These relatively new pressures within the shifting and newly globalised drag industry, alongside factors discussed above, have begun to directly affect and orientate not only the artistic practice and

business operation of performers (informing their style, virtual presence, motivations, and artistic/stylistic choices) but also steer their lives outside of that same work. Once more raising and problematising the issues of neoliberalism and its omnipresent nature, seeping into every fragment of an individual's life occupationally, personally/mentally, and socially. Performers are forced to take on multiple jobs that allow them to financially support a potentially blossoming career in drag, yet the investments to allow this are scarcely returned in either opportunity or worthwhile financial payment. Additionally, to their economic spending, performers' personal and social investment in their own drag brands (both in physical and virtual spaces) becomes a powerful force that in some cases even degrades the very mental and financial wellbeing of individuals. The local performer is expected to become a multi-faceted neoliberal subject, growing and maintaining established presences in both physical and virtual settings. Performers' occupational survival relies on them becoming multi-talented in a variety of skills inherent to the success of a drag performer, and ready to make large scale self-investments both financially and with all aspects of their human capital. Performers are expected to achieve this whilst usually only holding drag performer occupational status in low-pay part-time, and decidedly mundane, second jobs or "side-gigs" with little reward. The stresses, pressures, and expectations generated by the lesser-metropolitan socioeconomic context that surround them further tie them to the neoliberal ideals that already steer globalised and commoditised drag performance. To survive, local drag performers in such regions must undergo a transformative process. One that is not primarily concerned with the wonder of drag as an art form and showcasing queer creative expression, but one that closely resembles the hollow entrepreneurial and neoliberal subject.

8.1) Recommendations

Drag performance and the phenomenological experience of the performers who construct its associated scenes have been debated in contemporary scholarship, as addressed in my literature review in Chapter 2. This thesis, however, addresses a gap within this field of research by shifting the dominant focus of drag performance and the complex analyses of the socioeconomic dimensions that drag's synonymous communities hold, away from metropolitan contexts. Whilst my work contributes an original interdisciplinary incursion across associated research fields, development on some areas of focus is omitted from it. Additionally, as with all research projects, it has limitations which must be noted. Therefore, I propose several recommendations to expand upon existing literature and knowledge around drag and the experiential dimensions of its performers globally, nationally, and regionally.

Although my research helps open the lesser-metropolitan areas to study, I would argue that more work in this area is necessary to investigate *alternative* lesser-metropolitan regions nationally and/or transnationally and to enable comparisons. As articulated above, my project's focus is framed around Nottingham as an ethnographic case study, a city which I have argued to have a rich and complex cultural drag scene that is burdened by hindrances grounded in its local specificity. Whilst the findings of this study can be generalised to speak to the issues and experiences found in drag scenes situated in smaller cities around the UK, this project undeniably represents a geographically specific community. The smaller sample population size, whilst intrinsic to the focus of this project, additionally reflects this limitation. It would be beneficial, in furthering our understanding of regional drag communities and their links to neoliberalism, for similar work to be conducted around other lesser-metropolitan regions of the UK. This is since study of the socioeconomic complexities of such scenes could provide geographically specific nuances that would develop the breadth of this discussion and are therefore worthy of future research. Moreover, these types of work should include more interviewees, ensuring that the work establishes a richer reflection of the regional drag scenes it intends to investigate. In building bodies of academic discussion around such areas, the omission of lesser-metropolitan drag communities in existing academic debate would become more representative of marginalised communities' experiences and voices. Through its original combination of robust data collection through ethnographic methods, and its inclusion of performance studies, sociological analyses, and social media analyses, this project provides a nuanced approach to the investigation of such complex regional communities. Methodologically, the project has the potential to offer a framework for the study of other regions.

Whilst this thesis has included a comparative dimension to justify the local specificity at its heart of it, the metropolitan dataset has acted as supplementary to the primary arguments and discussions of the project. The development of these comparative analyses (if given primary focus in future work) would elicit further interesting insights into the national drag industry and its regional nuances. A comparative study between the operation of such scenes, perhaps even expanding the comparison to multiple scenes nationally, considering how regionality creates important differences and points of similarity, would develop the thrust of this thesis.

Although this work has illuminated various personal and social effects of occupational drag performance on its practitioners, further investigation into the psychological experiences of UK drag performers is needed. Whilst some existing academic literature reflects this intention, it once again is

commonly metro-centric and future debate should work towards being inclusive of performers from non-metropolitan spaces. As this thesis has shown, performers in such regions are potentially susceptible to risks of poor mental health. Consequently, further investigation into these individual experiences is of great importance and would provide a deeper understanding of the specific difficulties endured by such marginalised communities.

It should also be noted that this thesis has been undoubtedly skeptical about the current state of UK-based local drag scenes. Whilst such a judgement was not anticipated by the project, analyses made throughout it have demonstrated the failures of lesser-metropolitan spaces in supporting queer communities, specifically in relation to their local drag performers and scenes who act as symbols of queer expression and visibility. Through a clear focus on drag and the socioeconomic hindrances that its associated minoritised communities face, this thesis is topical not only within its closely related research fields, but also in wider discussions around queerness and the forms of discriminatory rhetoric and violence suffered by those same communities. At the time of writing, the UK has become entangled in political turbulence around the importance of queer and transgender identities, with LGBTQIA+ acceptance even being threatened by political leaders. More widely, rates of reported hate crime around sexual orientation have increased by 186% over the past five years, whilst transphobic hate crime has also increased by 112% over the past five years (at the time of writing) in the UK (Stonewall, 2023). Since many cases of such hate crime go unreported, these statistics only represent 'a snapshot of the reality' and severity of such discrimination (Stonewall, 2023). This worrying turbulence is transnational with similar statistical increases of related violence has also been established in the USA (Department of Justice, 2023). More closely related to this thesis' focus, is the push of recent conservative anti-drag legislation that has threatened to restrict the occupational and queer freedom of regional drag performers in the USA. In 2023, the states of Florida, Montana, Tennessee, and Texas passed state-specific laws that targeted the restriction of drag performance, despite most being later revised or deemed 'unenforceable' and 'unconstitutional' (MAP, 2023). These events clearly indicate the threat that heteronormativity poses to minoritised queer communities within our current socio-political period. Whilst I believe that the topic of drag and the socioeconomic issues its performers face will remain relevant, the current global dynamic that attempts to subjugate and oppress queer expression makes work such as this project as imperative. Through its focus on the demise of local queer safe spaces and the threat of homophobic discrimination which has been evidenced as harmful to the physical and mental wellbeing of participants has, and even with its smaller geographical focus, this project, has worked towards drawing attention to such issues. Further

work that produces wider debates around marginalised LGBTQIA+ communities and the issues faced by them would further the work done by this thesis.

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Appendix

10.1) Participant Interview Guide

Researcher Speaks:
"Firstly I want to thank you for engaging with this project. This interview is being conducted to help to understand more about the personal experiences of drag performers around the Midlands (more specifically) Nottingham, the location's effect on experiences of drag and the Nottingham scene itself, and perceptions of the drag industry from people involved in it. If you have any questions during the interview, please feel free to ask them. The interview should only take between 60-90 minutes and I will now begin with a few questions".

Question Number	Interview Question	Interview Prompt	Elicitation Material
Stage 1: Demographic Information			
1.1	Could you describe your current occupation (if you happen to be a student, specify the year of study)?		
1.2	Please state your age and gender identity.		
1.3	Please state your ethnic background.		
1.4	Please state your nationality.		
1.5	Please state your sexual orientation.		
1.6	Please state your education level.		
1.7	Please state your marital status.		
1.8	Do you currently have any student debt/loan?		
1.9	Do you receive any type of economic support from your parents/legal tutor/family member?		
Stage 2: Drag Experience and General Perception			
2.1	Drag is a term that often holds personal meaning, what does it mean *to you?*		
2.2	How often have you personally performed or "been" in drag? And for how long?		
2.3	Can you describe your first experience in drag?		
2.4	What town/city have you most performed/been in drag within?		
2.5	In a simple sentence, or a term, how best would you describe your drag?		
Stage 3: Motivations and Aspirations			
3.1	How would you describe your initial motivations for getting involved with/in drag?		
3.2	Do you think that those motivations have grown or even shifted/changed since you first started drag and if so how?		
3.3	Do you have any specific aspirations for or goals surrounding your drag?		

3.4 ☐	What is the most important aspect of drag to you?		

Stage 4: Location			
4.1 ☐	What is your overall opinion towards Nottingham?		
4.2 ☐	Has, and if so how, has Nottingham had a positive effect on your drag experience?		
4.3 ☐	Has, and if so how, has Nottingham had a negative effect on your drag experience?		
4.4 ☐	Have you felt the need or simply created your own opportunities for drag and your work in Nottingham where it potentially didn't exist?		
4.5 ☐	Do you think that UK based drag is different to US based drag?		
4.6 ☐	Do you think Nottingham's drag scene is different to other cities in the UK?		
4.7 ☐	How would you describe the drag scene and community in Nottingham?	(Friendships)	
4.9 ☐	Have you experienced any other drag scenes and/or communities elsewhere? If so how do they compare?		
4.10 ☐	What places in Nottingham provide safe spaces for your work, and are there any other places that you would perform/be in drag in that aren't specifically orientated around LGBTQ+ communities?		
Stage 5: Drag as Industry			
5.1 ☐	What are your overall feelings towards drag as an *industry* in the UK and, more specifically, in Nottingham?		
5.2 ☐	Has the industry has changed over time?		
5.3 ☐	How much opportunity for drag is there?		
5.4 ☐	In your opinion, what are the economic factors that influence both drag and your experience of it?	**[what are the costs?]**	
5.5 ☐	Do you ever feel a sense of competition within the drag world and/or Nottingham?		
5.6 ☐	In your opinion what is a 'successful' drag performer?		
Stage 6: Social Media and RPDR			
6.1 ☐	How important is social media to you as a drag performer?		
6.2 ☐	How dependent (if at all) are you on your drag social media accounts?		
6.3 ☐	Has social media played a role in the drag industry? If so – how?		
6.4 ☐	On the most recent *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* (season 2), RuPaul told contestant Tia Kofi that their drag was 'regional' and not		

	suitable for the 'international showcase' that is *RuPaul's Drag Race*. How do you feel about those comments as a drag performer?		
6.5 ⬜	Similarly, on the same episode RuPaul heavily critiqued Joe Black for wearing a dress that was 'off the rack' and stated that he didn't want to see 'any fucking H&M'. How do you feel about those comments as a drag performer?		
6.6 ⬜	How much of an effect has *RPDR* had on you – if at all?		
6.7 ⬜	How much of an effect has *RPDR* had on the drag industry and those that construct it – if at all?		

Stage 7: The Effect of Drag on the Personal			
7.1 ⬜	How has your experience and/or occupation in drag affected your social life?		
7.2 ⬜	Have you ever felt like your occupation/position as a drag performer has contributed to feelings of being ostracised or 'apart from' others?		
7.3 ⬜	Similarly, do you feel that as a drag performer there is ever a negative effect on your experience of and within LGBTQ+ culture?		
7.4 ⬜	Has, and if so how, has drag had an effect on notions on personal growth for you?		

Researcher Speak:
"Thank you for taking part in the study, this has provided a valuable insight to your practice, experience and engagement with drag performance. Your time taken to participate has been much appreciated and I will keep you informed of the results"

10.2) Participant Interview Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: *Locating Regional Cultures of Drag in Medium-Sized English Cities: An Ethnographic Case Study of Nottingham's Drag Scene*

What is this project about?

This research aims to explore the socioeconomic dimensions of regional drag scenes and investigate how these cultures of performance mobilize communities and economies of particular regions with reference to neoliberal contexts, focusing on the regional context of the Midlands and extend the research to other mid-sized cities in the region comparable to Nottingham as secondary contextual examples. Interviews between the researcher and 20+ Nottingham based drag performers will be undertaken to assess and explore the relation between Nottingham's location and drag performance, alongside exploring the socioeconomic mobilisation that drag performance does or does not catalyse.

Who is running this project?

Zack Ditch, an Midlands4Cities (M4C) and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Doctoral/PhD Student in the School of Arts and Humanities, Nottingham Trent University (NTU).

What will it involve?

You will be asked to participate in an interview of between 90-120 minutes, either online (via Skype or Zoom) or in person at a physical public location that is convenient to you within Nottingham, dependent on your preference. The interview will consist of several open questions for you to respond to. You will be asked about your experiences of drag performamance and as a drag performer, your opinions and perceptions of drag and it's cultural impact, and your opinions on your location's impact on your experience in drag. If you do not wish to answer any question asked, you may do so without giving a reason. If you wish to ask a question or expand upon anything, there will be room to do so after each question and also at the end of the interview. You are also free to do this via email after the interview has taken place.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

The aim is to interview a diverse range of participants with different backgrounds and experiences of drag performance *as* a drag performer. You have indicated that you would be willing to take part in this study and have been selected on the basis of creating a mixed group of interviewees overall.

What data will you collect from me?

The interviews will be audio recorded. You may, at your discretion, add to your responses in writing subsequently.

What will happen to the data you gather?

All audio recordings of the interview will be completely anonymised and transcribed into text. Once transcribed all audio files will be deleted and transcriptions anonymised. These transcriptions will be analysed to identify trends, key themes and quoted from the interview data. Quotes may be used in research outputs and disseminations in the future (e.g publications, presentations, teaching materials, and theses), but these will be again anonymised and not attritutable to any individual.

How will you protect my confidentiality and anonymity?

All of the raw data and any personal information you provide will be kept confidential and in a secure place. Interview transcipts and data analysis files will be fully anonymised so that you are not personally identifiable within the data. Where this anonymised data is subsequently used in the form of quotes, a pseudonym will be used so that you are not identifiable. In line with research best practice and NTU's Research Data Management Policy, the fully anonymised data from this study may be made available to those conducting subsequent studies in a form where no individual is identifiable.

What happens if I want to withdraw?

You are welcome to withdraw from the interview at any time, and do not need to give an explanation. You may choose to withdraw from the research up to one month after the interview. While your contribution will remain in the raw data, it will be anonymised and your comments you have shared will not be quoted or used in any outputs.

How can I find out more about the project and its results?

Lead researcher: Zack Ditch, School of Arts and Humanities, NTU, N0921443@my.ntu.ac.uk| **Director of Studies:** Cuneyt Cakirlar, School of Arts and Huamnities, NTU, cuneyt.cakirlar@ntu.ac.uk, +44 (0)115 848 3110| **Chair of the Art, Architecture Design and Humanities (AADH) Research Ethics Committee, NTU:** Professor Michael White, michael.white@ntu.ac.uk or 0115 848 2069

CONSENT FORM: *Locating Regional Cultures of Drag in Medium-Sized English Cities: An Ethnographic Case Study of Nottingham's Drag Scene*

Please read and confirm your consent to participating in this project by ticking the appropriate boxes and signing and dating this form.

1. I have read the project description and had the opportunity to ask questions about the project and these have been answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw by informing the researcher of this decision up to one month after the interview without giving any reason and without any negative implications. ☐

3. I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded . ☐

4. I undertand that the recording will be treated confidentially, anonymised and transcribed into text before being destroyed securely. ☐

5. I understand that quotations from the interview or responses given in writing, which will be made anonymous, may be included in material published from this research. ☐

6. I understand that any photographs I share of items that I have made may be included in material published from this research, but only where no individual is personally identifiable in the image. ☐

7. I understand that the anonymised data from this study may be used by those conducting subsequent studies but only in its anonymised form in which I am not identifiable. ☐

8. I am willing to participate in an interview as part of this research project. ☐

Participant's name	Date	Signature
Zack Ditch	12/03/2021	*Z Ditch*

Researcher's name	Date	Signature

Dr Cüneyt Çakırlar [DoS].   12/03/2021.

<mark>Supervisor's name   Date   Signature</mark>

Lead researcher: Zack Ditch, School of Arts and Humanities, NTU, N0921443@my.ntu.ac.uk | **Director of Studies:** Cuneyt Cakirlar, School of Arts and Huamnities, NTU, cuneyt.cakirlar@ntu.ac.uk, +44 (0)115 848 3110 | **Chair of the Art, Architecture Design and Humanities (AADH) Research Ethics Committee, NTU:** Professor Michael White, michael.white@ntu.ac.uk or 0115 848 2069

10.3) Participant Interview Debriefing Sheet

Debriefing Information

Researcher

Zack Ditch
N0921443@my.ntua.ac.uk
Phone: +44 (0)7443506897

Supervisors

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Finally, I would like to thank you for your participation in this research. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors in case you have any further doubts or questions. If you would like to get more information or seek support on any of the issues raised in the interview, please find attached a list of organisations that can offer additional support in case it is needed:

❖ Bi Pride UK
   An organization and community that continuously seek to provide safe spaces for anyone regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.
   https://biprideuk.org/

❖ Mind Out
   An organization that provides a mental health service run by and for the LGBTQ+ community.
   https://mindout.org.uk/

❖ Manchester Pride
   One of the UK's leading LGBTQ+ organizations/charities committed to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.
   https://www.manchesterpride.com/

❖ Switchboard
   An organization that provides a confidential listening service for the LGBTQ+ communities.
   https://switchboard.lgbt/

❖ Outright Action International
   An international leading organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.
   https://outrightinternational.org/

Researcher Name: Zack Ditch   Date: 12/03/2021   Signature:

Supervisor Name: Dr Cüneyt Çakirlar Date: 12/03/2021. Signature:

10.4) Data Management Plan

Locating Regional Cultures of Drag in Medium-Sized English Cities: An Ethnographic Case Study of Nottingham's Drag Scene

1. Project details

Full name:

Zack Ditch

Unique ID:

N0921443

Provisional project title:

Locating Regional Cultures of Drag in Medium-Sized English Cities: An Ethnographic Case Study of Nottingham's Drag Scene

Project start date:

2020-10-02

Project end date:

2024-09-30

Project context:

This study engages with the performers and communities that construct the Nottingham drag and queer scenes, although this research will extend into other cities in the Midlands region in a comparative context.

This is an individual project although it is funded by the Midlands4Cities institution.

The project is interdisciplinary in its nature, working across theatrical, sociological, humanity-based, and queer research fields however this project is not based in a particular research group nor department (although the NTU School of Arts and Humanities houses this project).

1. Defining your data

Describe your data and how you will be working with it

- Existing data will be combined from various sources (theoretical and empirical academic work, statistical figures and media-based sources) and analyse them to synthesise new arguments and combine with original data analysis collected from the project.
- I will record interviews with participants using a digital audio recorder, which will then be transcribed into text for further use and analysis.
- I will collect and analyse publicly accessible content from social media profiles (including public posts, images, 'bios', follower count) and this will be used for content analysis which will be placed into tables on Microsoft Excel. No sensitive data will be collected, instead this method relies on collecting 'extent' data which is publicly accessible.
- I will engage in participant observations, particularly in live drag performances, where ethnographic notes will be taken for future analysis.
- Online surveys will be created to collect anonymous data sets from the general public.

What formats and software will you use?

- All audio recordings will be saves as MP3 files, and transcribed into Microsoft Word documents.
- Participant observations will be recorded on a paper notebook, which will be digitalised into Microsoft Word documents.
- Online surveys will be created using a NTU endorsed platforms for ease of public dissemination.
- Microsoft excel will be utilised for content analysis tables and categorisation (especially with social media profile data collected and aspects of interview transcriptions).
- Mendeley will be utilised for reference management.

How much data do you expect to generate?

- I will record around 25 interviews. Interviews should be around 1 hours and 30 minutes each and will be stored as MP3's at around 90MB each. These will be transcribed into Microsoft Word documents of around 150KB each.
- I will record written data (on: images, captions, follower counts, and bios) from 26 Instagram Profiles. This will be stored in a 1GB Excel Spreadsheet.

2. Compliance & data ownership

Is some/all data subject to any institutional, legal, ethical, or commercial conditions?

After accepting all offers from NTU and M4C I have adopted and will comply with all provisions stated by the institutions' regulations, codes, procedures, rules and policies.
- Ethical approval will be obtained before any original data is collected.
- All data will be stored securely through NTU's OneDrive service and also backed up on an encrypted external hard drive.

What do you need to do to comply with these obligations?

- Access to all data will be only accessible to myself as the researcher and also my supervisory team.
- All data underlying published results will be kept for 12 months to ensure authenticity.
- All research undertaken that engages with data that is in any way personal, confidential and/or sensitive will be safeguarded by i) anonymisation, ii) secure data storage, iii) participant being formally introduced to all aims of research, how their data will be utilised, and their rights as a participant to the research.

Who owns the data?

- This project, although led by myself as main researcher, is established through a collaboration between myself and my supervisory team. Therefore, the IP policy suggests that the rights to this research data created belongs to NTU.
- Any third-party data used will remain the property of the provider.

3. Working with your data

Where will you store your data?

- All data will be stored securely via NTU's Onedrive and Datastore and linked to my personal NTU email address.
- All data should not exceed the provided 5TB of free storage on this platform.
- All data that is personal with also be anonymised.

How will you back-up your data?

- NTU datastore will automatically back up any personal or sensitive data.
- All other data will be backed up not only on NTU's Onedrive but also on a password encrypted external hard drive kept by the researcher.
- Any physical copies of data used by the researcher will kept in a locked filing cabinet at the home residence of the researcher.

Who else is allowed to access this data during the project?

- The data can only be accessed by myself and the supervisory team.

How will you organise your data folders?

Data folders will be separated by the following titles
- Interviews
- Interview Transcriptions

- Media Collection and Analysis
- Online Survey Data
- Participant Observation Data

How will you name your files?

- Each filename will begin with the date on which that data was saved/stored in YYYYMMDD

How will you manage different versions of your files?

Any adapted/new versions of files will be numbered at the end of the file name.

How will you ensure your data is understandable to others?

- Additional notes on all interviews will be kept with the transcriptions.

4. Archiving your data

What data should be kept, or destroyed, after the end of your project?

- NTU states that all data that supports my thesis at the end of the PhD project should be kept and accessible with few restrictions.

Where will you archive your data?

- Data will be placed into the repository before my output being submitted for publication/ peer review.

- Any data that will be made publicly available (see Sections 5b and 5c) will be deposited under an embargo until the final, approved version of thesis is submitted to IRep before the conferment of my degree.

When will you archive your data?

- *Before the project is finally submitted*

How long will the data be archived for?

- *In accordance with the NTU Records Retention Schedule, the research data will be retained for 10 years from the date of deposit.*

5. Sharing your data

How will others learn that your data exists?

My data will be made discoverable in a number of ways:

- *My thesis/ publication will include a data citation and data access statement, so readers will know where and how to access the underlying data.*
- *After depositing my project data in NTU repository, I will register my data with NTU by submitting a PGR Data Registry Form. A metadata record for my research data will be created in NTU IRep. This record will offer a full description of my data, as well as linking directly to the record of my thesis. The thesis record will also link to the dataset metadata record so that people who locate my thesis will also be directed to its underpinning data.*

Which data will be accessible to others?

- *All of my data may be shared openly upon submission of my final, approved thesis to IRep.*

Who will you share your data with and under what conditions?

- *The anonymised summary data will be available to anybody who has registered with the UK Data Service and agreed to the terms and conditions of their End User Licence. The full survey data will be placed under controlled access that is only available to users who have been trained, accredited and their data usage has been approved by the relevant Data Access Committee.*

How will you share your data?

- *Users will email the Library Research Team for access to the data in the NTU Data Archive.*

6. Implementing your DMP

How often will this plan be reviewed and updated?

My supervisory team and I will review this plan at interim meetings and I will update as required.

What actions have you identified from the rest of this plan?

- *Share DMP with supervisor and discuss any amendments before submitting it with the RD1PA.*
- *Arrange for the secure storage of personal, confidential data by completing and submitting the Active Research Data Storage request form.*
- *Request access to research team data storage.*
- *Set up and periodically test the backup system.*
- *Write a participant information sheet and informed consent form using guidance provided by the College Ethics Committee and the UK Data Service.*
- *Learn how to anonymise my data so that it can be shared.*
- *Ask the PI of the research team for file naming and folder structure protocols.*
- *Contact the repository to find out if and how I can deposit my data with them.*
- *Seek permission from third party data holders to use their data and include it in a final, open access thesis.*

What support/ information do you need to complete these actions?

- NTU Library RDM webpages
- UK Data Service
- *NTU Research Data Management Officer at LIBResearchTeam@ntu.ac.uk.*
- *RDM workshops in the RDF programme. The Researcher Development brochure contains the dates of available*
- Online tutorial: MANTRA-Research Data Management Training