

# Fashion, Inclusivity, and Pedagogy in Lifestyle TV: The Case of RuPaul's Drag Race

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## Abstract

This article investigates the role of fashion as a language of inclusion, resistance, and pedagogy within the context of lifestyle television, focusing on RuPaul's Drag Race as a paradigmatic case of lifestyle TV. Through an interdisciplinary lens drawing from media studies and fashion theory, the paper explores how the show reconfigures the conventions of makeover television to construct narrative spaces where marginalized identities gain visibility and agency. In the show, fashion functions not merely as visual ornamentation but as an affective tool to articulate personal stories, cultural affiliations, and acts of dissent. Runway performances, confessional interviews, and backstage interactions become sites of identity negotiation, collective memory, and community-building. Special attention is given to the representation of disability and neurodivergence, which, while still peripheral, point toward the possibility of "cripping the catwalk." Finally, the essay addresses the tensions between the show's pedagogical aspirations and its position within global commercial circuits, questioning the extent to which fashion television can sustain an inclusive and transformative cultural project. RuPaul's Drag Race emerges as a hybrid media space that queers fashion discourse and models alternative modes for audiovisual media.

**Keywords:** Lifestyle television; RuPaul's Drag Race; Fashion; Disability; LGBTQ+.

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## Introduction

The article aims to explore the intersection of fashion, inclusivity, and pedagogy within the realm of lifestyle television, focusing specifically on the cultural phenomenon of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (from now on *RPDR*) and its role in shaping public discourses around identity and inclusion. While traditionally dismissed as light entertainment, lifestyle TV has increasingly functioned as a space where complex social themes — including gender, race, body politics, and queer identities — are both performed and problematized. This article positions *RPDR* not only as a site of spectacle and entertainment, but as a potentially powerful tool for fostering inclusive narratives, with fashion serving as a central medium of expression.

Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives in media and fashion studies, this paper analyzes some specific contestants and selected episodes within the *RPDR* franchise, both from a visual and narrative point of view, to interrogate how fashion operates as a communicative and transformative tool, becoming a language of resistance and self-affirmation.

Some concepts developed in lifestyle television scholarship — particularly those addressing makeover narratives, performative pedagogy, and subversive aesthetics — are helpful to frame the *RPDR* franchise as a relevant example of “queer lifestyle TV.” Moreover, in *RPDR* franchise fashion becomes a language of resistance, identity affirmation, and community building. In runway segments and challenges contestants use fashion to contest heteronormative, racialized, and ableist beauty norms, producing visual content that attempts to affirm marginalized subjectivities. The paper highlights how the show's structure — especially through its Werk Room scenes, judges' critiques, and confessional interviews — creates dialogic spaces of affect, reflection, and pedagogy allowing *RPDR* to reclaim and reimagine fashion media for a broader, more inclusive audience.

## Factual, Reality, Makeover: The Relevant Role of Lifestyle Television

Lifestyle television is often overlooked as lightweight entertainment, particularly when focused on makeover formats, fashion tips, or domestic life. Yet, as argued in several articles and volumes<sup>1</sup> this genre is deeply embedded in contemporary cultural negotiations. In its more experimental and performative forms, lifestyle TV exceeds its surface appeal to enact what might be called “popular pedagogy”: it teaches viewers not just how to cook or dress, but how to perform identities, navigate cultural codes, and imagine alternative selves.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than seeing television merely as a reflector of taste, this article attempts to frame it as a maker of meaning, that can challenge gendered, classed, and racialized exclusions through the democratization of style, exploring how makeover television performs cultural work: dramatizing transformation, enlisting expert authority, and creating communities around shared affective investments. In rethinking fashion-centered entertainment through this lens, we see that it is not merely a space of consumption, but one of creative reconfiguration and social participation.

1. See for instance: Annette Hill, *Restyling factual tv. Audiences and news, documentary and reality genres* (London: Routledge, 2007); Dana Heller (ed.), *Makeover television. Realities remodelled* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better living through reality TV: Television and post-welfare citizenship* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (eds.), *Reality tv. Remaking television culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Veronica Innocenti and Marta Perrotta (eds.), *Factual, reality, makeover. Lo spettacolo della trasformazione nella televisione contemporanea* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013); Paola Brembilla and Veronica Innocenti, “Sustainability and Food Waste in Cooking Shows. On-Screen and Off-Screen Practices in MasterChef Italia,” in *Green Narratives, Ecology and Sustainability in Contemporary Television — Exploring Narrative Ecosystems*, eds. Andrea Bernardelli et al. (Bologna: Media Mutations Publishing, 2025), 189–206.
2. Veronica Innocenti, “Il Lifestyle nel sistema dei generi televisivi,” in *Factual, reality, makeover. Lo spettacolo della trasformazione nella televisione contemporanea*, eds. Veronica Innocenti et al. (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 17–25.

Lifestyle television has long occupied a hybrid position in TV ecologies. Rooted in public service imperatives of education and cultural uplift, early European models framed programs on cooking, home management, and fashion as tools for civic improvement.<sup>3</sup> Yet with the rise of commercial networks and digital multichannel environments, these didactic aims merged with entertainment logics, giving rise to what Annette Hill terms the “factual entertainment” genre a hybrid format that educates through performance and drama.<sup>4</sup> This hybridity destabilizes rigid genre boundaries, therefore, lifestyle TV can no longer be seen purely as educational or entertaining. Rather, it constitutes a pragmatic pedagogy rooted in everyday life: shows are increasingly defined by the specificity of the themes they treat — weddings, parenting, personal style — rather than by traditional generic categories.

In this context, fashion-centered makeover shows represent a crucial evolution. They take the aesthetics of self-presentation, often dismissed as frivolous, and reframe them as social practices worthy of collective attention. As Marta Perrotta shows, these programs stage personal transformation not as solitary improvement but as socially resonant drama.<sup>5</sup> They simultaneously mobilize and challenge dominant cultural scripts, performing the possibilities of becoming otherwise.

## Makeover as Narrative and Performance

At the core of fashion makeover TV is the promise of transformation. Shows like *What Not to Wear* (in its different local adaptations) or *Queer Eye* dramatize the process of remaking one’s appearance, and by extension, one’s life. These narratives operate through a structure that is partly borrowed from melodrama and partly from classic fairy tales. The effectiveness of these shows lies not only in the final reveal, but in the process itself, since makeover television simultaneously reinforces and contests the notion of normative taste.<sup>6</sup>

In these kind of shows, the expert plays a pivotal narrative role in this process: the figure of the expert oscillates between authority and accessibility. The makeover show expert does not simply dictate aesthetic norms; they mediate between elite knowledge (e.g., fashion trends, body language, grooming techniques) and everyday life. By translating professional expertise into layperson-friendly advice, the expert bridges social and cultural divides, offering viewers an aspirational yet reachable standard of self-presentation. This pedagogical model, though still hierarchical, can serve to democratize taste in small but significant ways.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, the visual grammar of the makeover format reinforces its narrative power. The use of the split-screen “before and after” montage is emblematic of the genre’s reliance on spectacle. This visual device is more than a comparison — it functions as a dramatic climax, a moment of public revelation that affirms both the success of the transformation and the legitimacy of the show’s authority. In some cases, mirrors are literally withheld from participants until the final reveal, emphasizing the control that the narrative (and the production) holds over the process of self-recognition. The reveal becomes both an emotional and pedagogical payoff for the subject, who sees themselves anew, and for the viewer, who has been led to understand transformation as both aspirational and achievable.

At the same time, makeover television reveals and exploits the labor involved in self-fashioning. The subject’s body becomes a canvas, acted upon by multiple agents. This layered authorship complicates the notion of authenticity that the shows often promote: while claiming to reveal a “real” self, the makeover

3. Veronica Innocenti, “Il Lifestyle nel sistema dei generi televisivi”, 22.

4. Annette Hill, *Restyling factual tv*.

5. Marta Perrotta, “Makeover tv. La televisione cambia pelle,” in *Factual, reality, makeover. Lo spettacolo della trasformazione nella televisione contemporanea*, eds. Veronica Innocenti et al. (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 29–30.

6. Marta Martina, “Il difficile concetto del ‘vestirsi bene’. Reversibilità e standardizzazione nei fashion makeover,” in *Factual, reality, makeover. Lo spettacolo della trasformazione nella televisione contemporanea*, eds. Veronica Innocenti et al. (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 70.

7. Claudio Bioni, “La sopravvivenza dell’esperto: autorità e scelta nella tv lifestyle,” in *Factual, reality, makeover. Lo spettacolo della trasformazione nella televisione contemporanea*, eds. Veronica Innocenti et al. (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 189–191.

process is intensely constructed, managed, and staged. In this sense, the genre simultaneously performs and critiques the neoliberal ideal of self-improvement. The individual is framed as responsible for their own success and image, yet their transformation is made possible only through collective, institutionalized labor — most of which remains invisible.

A major point of interest when it comes to lifestyle television is its attention to the social dimensions. Transformation is never merely personal: it is relational. The makeover process often enlists emotional labor — not just from the participants, but from viewers themselves. In this context, makeover television becomes a form of popular pedagogy. Viewers do not simply consume information, but they identify, reflect, and imagine new possibilities. Community formation plays a key role in this pedagogical process. Audiences are not passive; they form fan networks, share advice, and participate in online discussions that extend the life of the show.

In conclusion, fashion makeover television should be understood not as trivial or formulaic, but as a rich site of narrative, pedagogical, and ideological work. Through its performative structure, visual spectacle, and emotional dramaturgy, it offers a space where identity is staged, reshaped, and made publicly understandable. While often complicit with dominant norms, these shows also open up moments of contradiction, negotiation, and reflection, making them powerful, if ambivalent, tools for cultural pedagogy.

### *RuPaul's Drag Race*

Among many makeover shows available on television, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a drag queen reality competition franchise created by American drag entertainer RuPaul<sup>8</sup> that originated from the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (17 seasons, 238 episodes) which premiered in 2009 on Logo TV in the US. Today, the franchise is well established and is based on the original show with several spin-offs: *RuPaul's Drag U* (Logo TV, 2010-2012), *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (started in 2012 and discontinued several times by different networks, in 2025 it is now in its 10<sup>th</sup> season to be shown by Paramount+), *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race* (VH1 2020-2022) and *RuPaul's Drag Race Global All Star* (Paramount+ 2024). The show format also had several international adaptations such as British, Australian and New Zealand hosted by RuPaul himself, plus other 14 local versions including the Italian adaptation.

The program is based on a competition between drag queens and did not start out as a fashion talent show, but over the years it has become an important benchmark for fashion and style within the LGBTQ+ community. Design and fashion challenges are frequent and form a central part of the program, with contestants creating original outfits using unconventional materials and showing their ability to combine creativity, tailoring, and performance, as well as the prizes received at the various challenges routinely consist of clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics. The program has had a significant influence on popular culture and brought the art of drag to the forefront, making it known even to audiences distant from this type of phenomenon.

Shows like *RPDR* not only entertain relationships with the fashion industry, but they also have a significant impact on the fashion field, combining elements of entertainment, typical of mass media programming, with elements of competition and creativity, typical from the fashion industry. These shows offer participants a space to showcase their talent to a large audience, often propelling them to success. They also can influence fashion trends and public perceptions about style and beauty, helping to redefine aesthetic standards and promote discourse about diversity and inclusion in the fashion world, representing an important phenomenon in the contemporary television landscape.

The format of *RPDR* is quite simple, with drag queen contestants performing and being evaluated by experts. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, the format has many interesting traits such as its capacity to put together competition and performance (the talent show traits of the format), with entertainment and personal narratives, originating a very rich tv show. The show is organized through a precise format structure that regulates every aspects, from the spatial organization to the challenges contestants face in

8. Real name RuPaul Andre Charles, an artist with a solid career as television host, singer, producer, writer, and actor.

every episode. Moreover, the show has a relevant pedagogical goal through an accurate selection of specific traits of the drag culture in order to make them available to a global mass audience. As underlined by Niall Brennan:

RPDR has served to propel drag culture from the obscurity of the gay bar/club scene to the mainstream of reality television. It has also helped to transform common views of drag as subculture into drag as art and as a valid profession. It is perhaps the international reach and reverberations of RPDR, however, that best reflect newfound understandings of drag culture by way of its unexpected place in the reality television complex.<sup>9</sup>

In the many countries where the show is available, both as a ready-made show or as an adaptation, it is evident that “the overflow of *Drag Race* into reality puts a new spotlight on drag culture and steered the discourse towards positivity, inclusivity and empowerment”.<sup>10</sup> *RPDR* is not only a competitive reality show, it is a cultural phenomenon that has contributed to reshape the landscape of fashion and media representation. Emerging at the intersection of entertainment, performance, and identity politics, the franchise and its main expression *RPDR* offer fertile ground for examining how drag, for a long time rooted in queer subcultures, has been transformed into televised spectacle. While traditional makeover shows rely on expert authority and normative aesthetics, *RPDR* queers these conventions through parody, exaggeration, and emotional vulnerability. *RPDR* puts together the formulaic structure of lifestyle programming with subversive performance, creating a genre hybrid that serves as both entertainment and pedagogical tool. This show does not simply showcase talent: it models identity construction as an iterative, performative, and deeply social act.

## Fashion as Language: Performing Identity through Dress

Fashion in television shows is never just about clothes and in *RPDR* fashion is evidently a primary language through which drag queens articulate complex identities. Drawing from Roland Barthes,<sup>11</sup> fashion is seen as a system of signs through which subjects negotiate and rework cultural norms. On *RPDR* this capacity of fashion melts together with the “power of drag to challenge societal norms and address political and social concerns”<sup>12</sup> and runways and challenges become stages for communicating stories, references, critiques, and aspirations.

From categories like “Night of a Thousand Beyoncé’s” where contestants impersonate various looks and eras of Beyoncé, celebrating her status as a cultural and fashion icon to “Eleganza Extravaganza”, where queens showcase their most glamorous and extravagant looks, often emphasizing high fashion and couture, the runway performances in *RPDR* challenge hegemonic standards. Contestants juxtapose couture with parody, historical homage with fantasy, creating a syntax of style that questions both gender and genre. Dress becomes a multilayered communicative act, part drag history, part autobiographical reflection, and part aspirational spectacle.

In this framework, fashion is not ornamental: it is strategic. It visualizes dissent, queers time by referencing iconic queer eras or ancestors, and destabilizes aesthetic hierarchies. A queen like Sasha Velour, for example, uses conceptual and artistic looks to challenge pageant traditions, while Symone invokes Black cultural memory through symbolic garments.<sup>13</sup>

9. Niall Brennan, *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (Fairfield: Springer Nature, 2017), 347.

10. Luca Barra, Paola Brembilla, Linda Rossato and Lucio Spaziante, “‘Lip-Sync for Your Life’ (Abroad). The Distribution, Adaptation and Circulation of RuPaul’s Drag Race in Italy,” *View*, Vol. 9 (August 2020): 10. <https://doi.org/10.18146/view.210>.

11. Roland Barthes, *Sistema della moda*, edizione italiana rivista a cura di Bianca Terracciano (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2024).

12. Mario Campana, Katherine Duffy, Mikko Laamanen, Maria Rita Micheli, Rohan Venkatraman, “Introduction: What are Marketplace Cultures of Drag?,” in *Drag as Marketplace. Contemporary Cultures, Identities and Business*, edited by Mario Campana et. al. (Bristol UK: Bristol University Press, 2025), 10.

13. Daniel Rodgers, “The story behind Symone’s Black Lives Matter-inspired look,” <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/52158/1/symone-mowalola-inspired-rupauls-drag-race-black-lives-matter-look>.

As Hermes argued:

In how the queens in RuPaul's Drag Race use clothing as ways and means to build and rebuild identity and recognition there is the three-way connection between fashion as material practice, everyday relations of power and the individuals contesting, negotiating and using those power relations to find the best possible way to be who they feel they are.<sup>14</sup>

Fashion plays a crucial role in *RPDR* but it is also evident that the show, being such a successful franchise, has a strong and relevant impact on the fashion industry. For instance, designer Richard Quinn for Spring/Summer 2022 collection produced a film in which contestants from *RPDR UK* Tayce and Bimini Bon Boulash were important part of the cast:

"I'm a huge fan of the show," says Quinn from his studio in Peckham, south London. "We're inspired by the world [of drag] and we inspire the drag world back. So it's nice to bring the two worlds together. It's really great to see the perception of beauty evolve. I definitely get more excited by a person from *RuPaul's Drag Race* wearing something and bringing it to life rather than a bog-standard influencer."<sup>15</sup>

In the same period in 2021 other well established luxury brands such as Balenciaga got interested in the *RPDR* franchise and in its imagery: Balenciaga had a collaboration with RuPaul for a limited collection and a playlist on Apple Music curated by the artist. As contestant Gottmik, the first trans man to compete on the show (13<sup>th</sup> season), pointed out:

My specific mission in this life is to crash the system and break gender norms and boundaries, and any box that society is trying to weirdly put people in... I feel like a lot of designers and brands are trying to do the exact same thing for fashion today. So drag and designers are a match made in heaven.<sup>16</sup>

## The Narrative Arc of Transformation

*RuPaul's Drag Race* mirrors the makeover structure identified by Innocenti and Perrotta, in which transformation is not only aesthetic but emotional and narrative-driven. Contestants arrive with a visual or performance identity, but the show constructs arcs that foreground growth, struggle, and catharsis. The Werk Room, where contestants prepare for main challenges and runway presentation, functions as both a backstage and a classroom, a space for practicing drag but also for confronting trauma and building solidarity.

Unlike traditional makeover television where an expert transforms a passive subject, here the transformation is dialogic. Contestants become each other's mentors, critics, and mirrors. Confessional interviews provide another key narrative layer: queens narrate their own history and narrative arcs, reflect on past wounds, and envision future selves. These moments foster affective intimacy with viewers and model queer resilience and emotional intelligence.

Transformation is signaled through performance, both literally (in challenges and lip syncs) and metaphorically (in personal revelation and growth). This dynamic connects deeply to lifestyle TV traditions where identity is formed not in isolation, but through mediated, collective practices of self-fashioning.

Unlike the authoritative fashion critique often found in mainstream media and lifestyle tv, *RPDR* adopts a hybrid gaze that blends seriousness with camp. The judges (RuPaul, Michelle Visage, Carson Kressley) and guest critics evaluate garments on their aesthetic value, narrative clarity, and emotional

14. Joke Hermes, "RuPaul's Drag Race: Culture, Politics and Fashion as Affective Practice," in *The Size Effect: A Journey into Design, Fashion and Media*, eds. Antonella Mascio et al. (Milano: Mimesis International, 2019), 261.

15. Lucy Maguire, "RuPaul's Drag Race Stars: The New Supermodels?," <https://www.voguebusiness.com/fashion/rupauls-drag-race-stars-the-new-supermodels>, 19 July 2021.

16. Lucy Maguire, "RuPaul's Drag Race Stars: The New Supermodels?."



impact. A look may be technically brilliant but vacillates if it lacks authenticity or “story”. Conversely, an imperfect outfit might resonate powerfully if it carries cultural weight or emotional vulnerability.

The judging panel thus becomes a space of pedagogical discourse, articulating queer aesthetics value: resourcefulness, originality, references, and emotional truth. By embedding feedback within humor and warmth, the critiques model an alternative to elitist fashion commentary. This mode, simultaneously affectionate and rigorous, resonates with what in lifestyle television we can identify as “relational pedagogy”.<sup>17</sup>

Viewers too are implicated in the evaluative process: through hashtags, memes, and fan forums, audiences participate in reinterpreting the fashion content, often challenging the judges’ decisions or re-centering queens marginalized by the edit. This participatory dimension extends the pedagogy beyond the screen, inviting viewers to reflect on what fashion means in their own lives.<sup>18</sup>

It is also interesting to quickly dwell on the Italian adaptation of *RPDR*: the show started in 2021 with the title *Drag Race Italia* (without the reference to its host RuPaul, who is not so popular for the Italian general audience) and available first on Discovery + (2021 and 2022) and since 2023 on MTV/Paramount. At the moment there are 3 seasons available for a total of 26 episodes (6 episodes for season 1, 8 for season 2 and 12 for season 3). The show hosts are drag queen Priscilla, actress Chiara Francini and writer and influencer Tommaso Zorzi (replaced in season 3 by singer Paola Iezzi and actor Paolo Camilli). The adaptation is the occasion to open the Italian television scene and Italian society to “art forms rooted in queerness and performed by members of the LGBTQIA+ community”.<sup>19</sup> Fashion is clearly an important part of the show, beside the evaluation of the singing, acting and dancing qualities of the contestants, there is always a specific focus on the ability of the participants to create innovative and accurate costumes, original make-up and amazing hair styles. What seems to be lacking in the Italian adaptation is instead the attention toward disability and diversity, issues that are overlooked in the three seasons of the show. *Drag Race Italia* is, on the one hand, an innovative show for the very traditional Italian media system, but on the other hand the show’s authors are perfectly aware that being too disruptive could be counterproductive in terms of visibility and viewership. Therefore the show prefers to focus on themes that are more easily handled in terms of writing and staging, from Italian-ness (particularly pushed in the first episode of the first season) to themes related to family, especially the ideal and extended family composed of the LGBTQ community.<sup>20</sup>

The Italian adaptation of the show also seems to demonstrate a different orientation compared to the original U.S. version, particularly in terms of its socio-cultural engagement. While the original *RPDR* progressively integrates themes of identity, trauma, and queer pedagogy into its format, the Italian version is more focused on an entertainment approach. This approach might have several reasons, among them there is the production and distribution context. As a Discovery+/Paramount+ product, the show is firmly situated within a commercial media environment that prioritizes light entertainment over civic or educational missions. Unlike programming on the Italian public broadcaster RAI, which is traditionally tasked with addressing social and cultural issues, *Drag Race Italia* operates within a subscription-based and commercial framework that tends to avoid controversial or politically charged topics. Moreover, its broadcast on Real Time (available for free to TV viewers) — a “mini-generalist” channel with a wide viewership — might reinforce this positioning.<sup>21</sup> The show tends to favor themes that are more easily digestible for a general audience, including fashion, Italian cultural identity, and spectacle, while largely sidestepping more disruptive or intersectional conversations around disability, racial diversity, or

17. Veronica Innocenti, “Il Lifestyle nel sistema dei generi televisivi,” in Innocenti, Perrotta (eds.).

18. See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

19. Alice Parrinello, “‘Ciao Italia’: Homonationalist and Homonormative Tendencies in *Drag Race Italia*,” *Simultanea*, vol. 3, (2022), 1.

20. Alice Parrinello, “‘Ciao Italia’: Homonationalist and Homonormative Tendencies in *Drag Race Italia*”, 3.

21. Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore. “Converging Trends: The Industrial and Content Dynamics of Contemporary Television.” *Cinergie – Il Cinema E Le Altre Arti*, vol. 12 (2023), 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/18447>.

systemic marginalization. This reflects the structural and cultural limitations of queer representation in Italian mainstream television.

Also, it is important to take a look to the audience reply to the Italian adaptation of the show. The Italian adaptation of *RPDR* garnered notable attention upon the free-to-air debut of the first season on Real Time and Nove few weeks after the original broadcast on Discovery+. The premiere gathered 550,000 total viewers (2.3% share), of which 353,000 viewers (1.5%) were on Real Time and 197,000 viewers (0.8%) on Nove. In its second season, when *Drag Race Italia* aired in prime time on Real Time (January-February 2023), official press summaries note average shares ranging between 0.9% and 1.8%, with a season mean of approximately 1.3%.<sup>22</sup> These audience figures indicate a niche but visible presence — not comparable to mainstream prime time standards but consistent with a format targeted toward specialized or enthusiast audiences. Overall, these data account for a modest performance on free to air channels that might have impacted on the next seasons and on the decision to suspend the production of the show, which has not been officially cancelled in Fall 2025, but has been on stand-by since 2023.

## Cripping the Catwalk: Disability, Visibility, and Embodied Diversity

To *crip the catwalk* is to intervene in dominant aesthetic regimes by bringing disabled modes of being, movement, and dress into the realm of fashion performance — a gesture aligned with crip theory's project of subverting ableist norms.<sup>23</sup> In the context of fashion TV such a move would invite shows to reconceptualize runway expectations (e.g. choreography, timing, costuming) in ways that center embodied difference rather than marginalizing it. Integrating these perspectives into fashion TV shows would strengthen the argument that fashion television can not only represent difference but must also structurally adapt — through contesting standards of movement, temporality, and spectacle — to realize more inclusive, crip-aware pedagogies of style.

Although *RPDR* foregrounds racial, gender, and cultural diversity, disability and neurodivergence seem to be a little underrepresented. To a certain extent, ableism operates subtly within fashion aesthetics and performance expectations on the show. Drawing from Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate gaze"<sup>24</sup> we can observe how even queer fashion often idealizes certain bodies, toned, flexible, expressive, and marginalizes others.

Moments of disability discourse do occur in the show, though. Yvie Oddly, Season 11 winner, disclosed her Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a condition that affects connective tissues and impact on her style and mobility and used her hypermobility as part of her aesthetic, challenging viewers' expectations of movement and bodily coherence. Also, she seems particularly interested in remarking the role of fashion in her performances, since starting from her presentation she acknowledges as fundamental inspiration for her drag Mugler and Alexander McQueen, declaring that she is ready to combine fashion element with her personal unique perspective.

Season 14 winner, Willow Pill, also marks a step forward in the representation of disability in popular media. Willow enters the show openly talking about her condition:

Since birth, Willow, who lives in Denver, Colorado, has been battling cystinosis, a rare genetic disorder that effects just about every system in the body, starting with the kidneys. (Her sister, Elizabeth, died from cystinosis complications months after Willow finished filming *Drag Race* last summer). "It's a frickin' ravenous and thorough disease," Willow tells

22. "Drag Race Italia", Wikipedia page, accessed 25 October 2025, [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drag\\_Race\\_Italia\\_\(terza\\_edizione\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drag_Race_Italia_(terza_edizione)).

23. See, among others, Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York-London: New York University Press, 2006); Royce Mahawatte and Jacki Willson (eds.) *Dangerous Bodies. New Global Perspectives on Fashion and Transgression* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

24. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



PEOPLE. “My kidneys went into failure when I was 14, and within a year I was on dialysis and received a transplant from my brother. But then cystinosis starts to infiltrate other organs as you get older.”<sup>25</sup>

Willow’s disability is told to the viewers with reference to particular aspects of her pathology and how they impact her daily life and drag performance. For example, motor difficulties that primarily affect fine motor skills are made evident at times when Willow is at work in the Werk Room constructing her outfits, and her movement difficulties slow down the processing time of her outfits. Nevertheless, Willow is defined by another contestant as someone who does not complain, who gets her job done regardless of her condition. In the case of Willow, the narrative about disability includes issues related to movement (for instance the difficulties in applying make-up because of the hand tremor caused by the disease), but also the emotional struggle of living with a permanent medical condition.

Similarly, some queens have shared experiences of chronic illness, trauma, or mental health struggles: several queens, including Kameron Michaels, Jasmine Kennedie, and Thorxy Thor, have discussed their experiences with ADHD. This narrative raised different comments by critics and viewers. On the one hand, some underlined that speaking about the ADHD diagnosis, as Jasmine Kennedie did in order to explain her being over-talkative, might have been a good opportunity “to discuss her ADHD diagnosis and the ways disability can manifest on her social media accounts”.<sup>26</sup> But on the other hand some pointed out that:

By failing to properly contextualise Jasmine’s loquacity in light of her ADD diagnosis, not only did it fall to Jasmine to ‘address the talkative elephant in the room’ and defend herself from the viewers’ perceptions. It also plays into the wider issue of the predominantly negative media portrayal of people with ADD/ADHD. It is perhaps fair to say that most people first learn about ADD/ADHD through television, where, from Bart Simpson to Jonah Takalua, characters with ADD/ADHD are frequently portrayed as disruptive, potentially dangerous, and – more often than not – positioned as the butt of the joke. Media portrayals of ADD/ADHD are usually limited at best, and derogatory at worst.<sup>27</sup>

Other forms of neurodivergence have been the subject of narratives, as well as advocacy, in the show, highlighting how these conditions might impact their drag and interactions on the show, but more importantly her own perspective on life. This is the case of Ginger Minj who found out to be in the autistic spectrum while doing the casting process for *All Stars 10* and went in for a psychiatric evaluation:

The way I communicated, the therapist said, “Are you autistic? Are you on the spectrum?” I had my suspicions, but I said I’d never been tested. He said he’d like me to be tested. So, I did. I got tested, and I am. It put 40 years of my existence into perspective so quickly for me. I’ve learned so many different tools to be like, this isn’t something that should hold me back. It should be more of a superpower, a strength of mine. I leaned into it.<sup>28</sup>

Generally the show’s approach to these stories is to frame the physical or mental conditions sometimes as obstacles to overcome and often as identities that reshape what drag and fashion can be.

To truly “crip” the catwalk, as disability scholars suggest, *RPDR* would need to rethink the physical and temporal demands of its format, from choreography expectations to endurance-based challenges. More importantly, it should expand its visual and narrative grammar to include disability not only as

25. Dave Quinn, “RuPaul’s Drag Race’ Star Willow Pill Details Life with Cystinosis: ‘Nothing Is Unaffected By It’,” *People*, April 22, 2022, <https://people.com/health/rupauls-drag-race-star-willow-pill-cystinosis-battle/>.

26. Ezra Brain, “The Importance of Representations of Trans Identity on ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’,” <https://screenspeck.com/2022/03/07/drag-race-trans-identity/>.

27. Catherine Dent, “RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 14: ADD/ADHD in the Media,” <https://theeverydaymagazine.co.uk/opinion/adhd-in-the-media>.

28. Joey Nolfi, “RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars 10 queen Ginger Minj reveals autism diagnosis,” *Entertainment Weekly*, June 14, 2023, <https://ew.com/ginger-minj-reveals-autism-rupauls-drag-race-all-stars-10-11754717>.

backstory but as artistry. Drag as a form should be capacious enough to contain all bodies, all mobilities, all expressions.

Nevertheless, *RPDR* works well as a corrective to the narrow beauty and identity ideals perpetuated in mainstream fashion television. It centers queer joy, complexity, and plurality, showcasing Black queens, trans contestants, disability, non-binary aesthetics, and global drag cultures. In doing so, it validates viewers who have long been excluded from normative media representations. Yet, this visibility is embedded within the commercial logics of a global franchise and the risk of commodifying queerness, blackness or disability for mass consumption may dilute its radical edges as it has been underlined about another very popular makeover/lifestyle show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*:

In *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* author bell hooks states that modern depictions of the Other, marginalized minorities, have been transformed through a consumer culture that seeks to profit off of perceived difference. From this it can be noted that “the commodification of difference promoted paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer.”<sup>29</sup>

Some critics argue that recent seasons of *RPDR* have smoothed out political conflict in favor of more polished production values. Brand sponsorships, celebrity tie-ins, and transmedia marketing raise questions about who ultimately benefits from drag’s visibility boom. In fact, *RPDR* and all its connected products behave in a way that can be likened to media franchises and, as Paola Brembilla notes in this regard:

insert themselves into the consciousness and lifestyle of consumers so that they continue to invest time and money in the products and experiences generated from the intellectual properties. It is, in other words, an extended business environment encapsulated in a multifaceted brand, which is expressed in the idea of “total entertainment.”<sup>30</sup>

It is inevitable, to guarantee such a long success for the franchise and its shows, to strengthen all the possible commercial agreement in order to make the brand more profitable as possible: this attitude perfectly fits within the logic of commercial television and is not in contrast with the pedagogical attitude of lifestyle TV whose more difficult task is to keep commercial and economic drives together in a balanced way with educational and entertainment drives. At the moment, the revenues for the franchise come from several fields: advertising of course, but also merchandise and international licensing of the show to various countries. Moreover, *RPDR* queens often participate to tours and live shows, generating revenues through tickets and through their appearances in other shows.

This said, it is still relevant to underline how *RPDR* has been opening doors: its global reach has brought local drag traditions into conversation with each other, sparking cultural hybridization. More than a competition, the franchise is a transnational platform for artistic and political expression. And that platform matters as a stage on which marginal voices can speak and be seen.

## Conclusion

*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, through its hybrid format of competition, fashion performance, and emotional storytelling, has inaugurated a redefinition of what fashion television can be: not merely a showcase of garments and trends but a profoundly pedagogical and transformative space. Rooted in the lineage of lifestyle and makeover TV, *RPDR* expands the scope of televised self-fashioning to include queer identities, racial and cultural specificity, and increasingly, narratives around disability and neurodivergence. This paper has attempted to explore how *RPDR* not only stages transformation but reimagines it, offering a model of identity construction that is iterative, affective, and always entangled with community and culture.

29. Michael J. Yaksich, “Consuming Queer: The Commodification of Culture and its Effects on Social Acceptance”, *Elements*, Vol. 1 (April 2005). <https://doi.org/10.6017/eurj.v1i1.8856>.

30. Paola Brembilla, *Franchise mediali. Industrie, narrazioni, pubblici* (Bologna: Patron, 2023) 47 (my translation).

At the heart of *RPDR*'s cultural impact lies its use of fashion as a language of resistance and self-affirmation. Fashion, in this context, is not simply aesthetic decoration but a strategic and symbolic act, a way of queering dominant narratives, referencing subcultural histories, and asserting visibility for those historically excluded from mainstream media. Contestants like Sasha Velour, Symone, Gottmik, and Willow Pill exemplify how dress, performance, and identity are not discrete categories but interwoven practices that challenge normativity. Their work on the runway becomes a visual manifesto, articulating personal histories and political claims through silhouette, color, texture, and gesture.

Moreover, the show's structure, particularly the interplay between the Werk Room, runway critiques, and confessional interviews, models a form of "relational pedagogy,"<sup>31</sup> where knowledge is not delivered top-down from expert to novice, but emerges dialogically through lived experience, mutual reflection, and emotional vulnerability. The concept of *relational pedagogy* aligns closely with the structure and aims of factual, reality, and makeover television formats. In shows like *RPDR*, learning does not occur through abstract instruction but through mediated, emotionally charged experiences shared by contestants. These experiences — narratives of transformation, moments of vulnerability, and peer interactions — reproduce a pedagogical environment rooted in relationship and lived experience. Viewers are invited to witness and identify with the challenges and growth of participants, fostering a form of learning that is experiential, affective, and dialogic. This model mirrors the educational strategies seen in many makeover and lifestyle programs, where transformation is framed not just as aesthetic improvement but as a process of self-discovery and empowerment. The relational aspect — between contestants, between judges and participants, and between the show and its audience — makes this genre particularly effective in engaging viewers emotionally and cognitively. It is precisely this dynamic that allows factual entertainment to function as a form of *popular pedagogy*, capable of transmitting values, behaviors, and cultural knowledge in ways that resonate beyond the screen.

However, *RPDR*'s inclusive project is not without limitations. As discussed, the representation of disability and neurodivergence, while present in cases such as Yvie Oddly and Willow Pill, remains peripheral and often framed within narratives of inspiration or overcoming adversity. A truly inclusive fashion pedagogy would require deeper structural adjustments, rethinking performance challenges, visual conventions, and production timelines to accommodate and celebrate diverse bodies and capacities. While there have been powerful moments of resistance and redefinition, the show still operates within aesthetic regimes that valorize certain forms of beauty, movement, and coherence, sometimes reproducing ableist norms under the guise of glamor.

Further complicating *RPDR*'s cultural role is its commercial success. The franchise's global reach and corporate entanglements raise questions about the commodification of queer culture. *RPDR* walks a delicate line: its visibility has empowered countless viewers, shaped public conversations around gender and fashion, and created space for diverse queer voices, but it also participates in the very circuits of capitalist consumption that lifestyle TV is embedded within. The pedagogical power of *RPDR*, therefore, must be understood in tension with its status as a transmedia brand.

Nonetheless, *RPDR* remains a remarkable site of queer visibility and cultural production. It has redefined what fashion looks like and who gets to participate in its production, not only as designers or models but as storytellers and agents of change. Its format borrows from and queers the conventions of makeover television, turning spectacle into critique and style into social commentary. In doing so, *RPDR* shows that fashion television, often dismissed as trivial, can become a tool of resistance, a space of affirmation, and a powerful platform for imagining more inclusive futures.

As lifestyle television continues to evolve, *RPDR* stands as a compelling case for its potential as a mode of popular pedagogy. The show does not teach how to dress, but how to express, how to narrate, and how to belong. It offers a vision of fashion not as a gatekeeping industry, but as a collective practice of

31. On the role of the relational side in education see Charles M. Bingham and Alexander M. Sidorkin (eds.), "No Education Without Relation." In *Counterpoints* vol. 259 (2004), and Alexander M. Sidorkin, *Pedagogy of Relation. Education After Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

becoming otherwise. In this sense, *RPDR* is not merely a show about drag, it is a performative classroom, a cultural archive, and a stage for imagining what fashion and media might yet become.

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