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“LIP-SYNC FOR YOUR LIFE” (ABROAD)

THE DISTRIBUTION, ADAPTATION AND CIRCULATION OF RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE IN ITALY

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Abstract: The article aims to critically explore and understand the ways both RuPaul’s star persona and its show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, are distributed in Italy, circulate across, and impact on the Italian television industry and media culture. It also aims to express how many forms of national mediation, professional negotiation and audience reception deeply modify, and re-shape the TV product. To tackle the manifold facets of this case, four aspects will be analyzed: (trans)national distribution; adaptation and dubbing; global/local stardom; reception and cultural impact. Over a decade, the Italian edition and distribution of the show have changed, together with the national media landscape and its audiences.

Keywords: Italian television, media industries, reception studies, dubbing, stardom, celebrity

1 Introduction

RuPaul’s Drag Race is a TV show, a reality competition with drag queen contestants performing and being evaluated by expert judges, which has reached the eleventh season and given birth to several extensions and spinoffs. In the US, the program has long been broadcast on linear channel Logo (2009-2016), and has then moved to VH1 (2017-), which is part of the same company, Viacom. The show, aimed at singling out “America’s next drag superstar”, has increasingly

obtained recognition and success, contributing to the strengthening of RuPaul's star persona, as well as to the establishment of other drag celebrities and buzzwords. Over the years, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (henceforth *RPDR*) has also slowly become a global phenomenon, in terms of both wide media discourses and cultural influence. The show is a relevant international ready-made content, which is still being acquired, adapted and repackaged in many countries. Moreover, given its subject, it is also a significant cutting-edge and thought-provoking program, impacting on different national markets and cultures in manifold ways.

Italy has been one of the many countries where first RuPaul, and later his signature show, have arrived. However, the process has not been fast or easy. On the contrary, the Italian path of *RPDR* is a good example of the many layers of a complex "national mediation"¹: as soon as it enters another national market, the foreign TV show is changed, directly or indirectly, in order to be watched by a different audience. What is commonly referred to as a 'ready-made' product, actually, is not ready to be broadcast at all, but often needs to be re-framed, and sometimes re-shaped. As revealed by media industry studies and research on production cultures, working routines and professionals strongly impact on television shows and other media products,² and this is true also for imported programming. The acquisition stage defines from the very beginning the ways the foreign show can be or cannot be employed in another country.³ Processes of translation, adaptation and dubbing strongly or lightly modify each programme.⁴ Scheduling decisions on traditional broadcasting, release choices through on demand platforms, as well as promotion and marketing strategies⁵ frame the show differently for distinct national audiences. Along this mediation process, issues are raised and somehow taken care of, and both critical reception and audience success (or failure) are dependent on this as much as on product quality.

RPDR is an important example of such national mediations and constant negotiations, with false paths, trial and errors, a complex life cycle and a stratified reception. Therefore, we will address this case history through different lenses, with the aim of better showing these processes and their results at work. In the first part, a national distributive history of *RPDR* is reconstructed: some seasons were shown on a satellite female-oriented channel, then all the series were made available on Netflix, in both cases the series were provided with a differentiated Italian "packaging". In the second section, the focus will be on the Italian dubbing and subtitling of the show, and on the many challenges of adapting the jargon, domesticating drag culture and packaging the episodes for a national audience. The third section will delve into the reception of the show, exploring the ways *RPDR* has shaped the perception of drag culture in Italy, bringing also to the fore the controversies of commercializing a sub-culture. Lastly, in the fourth section, the cultural effects of *RPDR* on some parts of the Italian society and on the drag community are examined, with an interest on matters of visual representation and language.

2 From Failure to Cult Success. The Italian Distribution of the Show

The distribution history of *RPDR* on Italian television and digital platforms is an interesting example of how national media industries are constantly shaping – or, at least, trying to shape – foreign ready-made products, to better reach local audiences and take into account their specificities. A strong, constant negotiation is at play between the evolution of the product in the source market (and in its international distribution) on the one hand, and the changes happening in the national media industry on the other. License rights and acquisitions, scheduling choices and marketing strategies are not neutral factors, but can strongly affect, and at least partially define, the life cycle of the show and its national success.

First, the arrival of the show was not happening inside a void. In the digital era, some portions of the foreign, English-language debates were reaching at least a portion of the Italian audience, building attention and hype. Moreover, RuPaul was already quite well known to a mainstream national public. His first Italian television

appearance dates back to February 1994, when he was onstage at the most relevant musical, televisual and social event in the country, the annual week-long *Festival di Sanremo* (1951-), performing 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' in a duo with Elton John, and creating a huge sensation.



Video 1. Elton John performing 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' together with RuPaul in the 1994 edition of *Festival di Sanremo*.

Some years later, in October 2001, RuPaul was also appointed to judge a drag queen contest within the television show *Tacchi a spillo* (*High Heels*, 2001) aired on commercial network Italia 1. With eight performers singing, dancing and acting, evaluated by a group of celebrities, the program was cancelled after only two episodes, due to low ratings and several protests by conservative associations and family pressure groups. However, this fact is an indication of the lasting Italian fame of RuPaul's TV personality; and it is curious to note how the Italian show was based on very similar mechanisms to the ones employed by *Drag Race*, which only started many years later, in 2009 (although many accounts date back RuPaul and his producers' idea to the mid-Nineties).⁶

In this context, the first attempt to import and broadcast *RPDR* on Italian television was made in 2011, two years after the launch of the US first season on Logo. The show was picked up by the Italian branch of Fox International Channels (then owned by NewsCorp.), and broadcast on premium channel Fox Life, mainly targeting a female audience, and included in the Sky Italia pay satellite bouquet.⁷ The Italian distribution started from the third US season, scheduled with a weekly episode from July 13, 2011, on a Wednesday, first on the second portion of the prime time (at 21.55), then quickly moved to a later slot (at 22.45). The fourth US season was broadcast from July 24, 2012, on Tuesday evenings, at 23.35. The fifth one was screened from July 1st, 2013, on Monday evenings, at 23.15 – and made available to subscribers on non-linear platforms Sky On Demand and Sky Go. The decision to skip the first two seasons, and to acquire the license to broadcast from season III onwards, was mainly due to the need to keep the 'freshness' of the show, rather than the completeness of a reality competition: in the eyes of the programmers entertainment shows are generally not valued as a whole complex serial product, but they are perceived as functional parts that can be used separately according to what is deemed most appealing to the local audience; as a result, *RPDR* episodes were broadcast in Italy just a handful of months after the US transmission. At the same time, however, the scheduling choices made for these episodes – i.e. the summer broadcast, the lowest season for Italian TV; the increasingly late night slots – clearly show how the channel employed the show as a minor asset. The originality of the reality competition was not enough to compensate its perceived riskiness for the national audience, with contradictory decisions that ultimately led, as often happens in the television business, to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

RPDR, as broadcast by Fox Italia, included many other variations. The title of the show was 'translated', using another English title, into *America's Next Drag Queen*: the name of the creator, despite his previous national celebrity, was erased, and a direct connection to another reality competition show, *America's Next Top Model* (2003-), broadcast by the same pay TV platform, was established instead⁸; a stronger connection to fashion was also a clear hint by the channel's executives and programmers towards an important aspect of Italian national culture, more familiar to national audience than a LGBTQ+ angle. The episodes were dubbed, with simil-synch techniques, slowing the process and increasing the costs. Moreover, the promotional campaigns struggled to find a right key to present it to Italian audiences, in a trial and error process. The third season promo, following the choice of the Italian title, was built in order to suggest and strengthen a strong association with the fashion industry and its main rituals ("the top model era is over"). The fourth season promo stressed even more this factor, building on a consumerist approach ("It doesn't matter who you are. What matters is that what you're wearing fits you wonderfully"). The fifth season is marketed as a competition, highlighting the savage dynamics that *RPDR* shares with other reality shows, with contestants 'up for anything to win'. Also in the promos, RuPaul's star persona stays often in the background: differently from other countries, as the US or the UK, where the celebrity status and public image are a crucial part of the show's success, Italian pay TV's programmers and marketers choose to drop this identification between the show and its host from the title and promos in the initial launch strategy, probably in the effort of "normalizing" at least partially the reality competition, yet also underestimating the previous, long lasting local popularity of RuPaul.



Video 2. Italian promo on Fox Life (2011).



Video 3. Italian promo on Fox Life (2012).



Video 4. Italian promo on Fox Life (2013).

If the expectations were not high in the first place, *America's Next Drag Queen* had even lower results. The show gained some press recognition, with articles presenting it as "the craziest show of the year",⁹ but failed to find an Italian audience. Not only were the first two seasons not caught up, but also the linear broadcast was discontinued after these three years, creating then a long pause in the national (legal) availability of the show for its most loyal fans. Only a few months after the official launch of Netflix in Italy (on October 22, 2015),¹⁰ and exactly in February 2016, a new Italian window for *RPDR* finally opened. As a part of a larger, global deal (outside the US), the series was released in all its seasons, except the first one, and made available in its English-language version, with Italian subtitles; starting from season eight, an Italian dubbed version, with simil-synch techniques, was added too.

The show got back its original title and, despite not being marketed specifically to platform subscribers (no trailers or promotional content was developed, other than the cover images and short presentation texts), it obtained progressively more recognition, through press and word-of-mouth. Once again, its availability was tied to license contracts, at a global and national scale. On March 30, 2018, the previous batches disappeared, and only season eight and nine stayed on Netflix Italia, while all the others moved to the library of WOW Presents Plus, a VoD service launched by World of Wonders, the production company *RPDR*. An acquisition issue, due to an attempt to capitalize from an increasing global popularity (excluding the US, where the show had passed from Logo to VH1 the year before, in 2017), resulted thus in a perceived disappearance, once again, from the country: this decision "comes as Netflix's rights deal for the episodes expires. [...] Netflix's status as the home of *Drag Race* [has] been met with competition from other platforms who have vied to pick up the rights".¹¹ But this was just a temporary stunt, and some months later, in December, all the seasons were once again available on Netflix Italia, including the previously unseen season one. Also, some of the spinoffs¹² were released: the four seasons of *RPDR All Stars* (2012-), a Christmas special *RPDR: Holi-slay Spectacular* (*Spettacolosamente Natale*, in Italian; 2018). Thanks to the availability on non-linear digital platforms (and to the strength of the Netflix brand), *RPDR* has finally been able to reach its Italian niche-yet-relevant audience. Despite the lack of ratings and data, a proof of this improved positioning in the national arena is the presence, for the first time, of four Italian live dates (in Milan, Rome and Bologna) inserted in the *RuPaul's Drag Race Werq the World Tour*. After some struggles, and several changes in re-packaging its presentation to the national audience, this reality competition has now gained a deserved cult show status. Its recognition and audience base is progressively growing stronger, although its presence limited to Netflix, an on demand service with a total of two million subscriptions in Italy,¹³ and the lack of discussion on the most popular media outlets, still keeps it quite far from the "actual" national mainstream.



Video 5. Trailer of RuPaul's Drag Race: Werk The World Tour 2019.

3 Speaking Like a Queen: Adaptation and Dubbing of the Show into Italian

RPDR contestants' use of slang terms, acronyms, neologisms and fanciful catchphrases seems to be an essential component of the exotic appeal of the original show. Outlandish expressions like "Water off a duck's back" – meaning a criticism which does not affect the criticized person – or rhetorical questions like "How is your head?", with a clear sexual innuendo, or the pervasive "to spill the Tea", a back formation for letter T, which stands for "the truth", referring to gossip, news or simply the truth, have all become buzzwords populating blogs and social media after having been extensively used by drag performers on the show. From "Absolutely" by Gia Gun, a contestant on season 6, to "Backrolls" by Jade Jolie, a contestant on season 5 who referred it to another contestant, Alyssa Edwards, distinctive drag culture expressions are generally referred to on the net as *Drag Race* memorable quotes¹⁴. Although some of these terms already belonged to the niche language of drag and queer subcultures, the success of this reality show has contributed to bringing them more into the "mainstream". Moreover, *RPDR* contestants' talk is permeated by expressions and descriptions of how it is to speak like an American drag queen, thus also revealing how marginalized populations use a sort of "speech code" to construct rules of conduct for a coherent identity.¹⁵



Video 6. Mashable's 'RuPaul's Drag Race queens teach us the language of drag'

As for the Italian LGBTQIA+ queen and queer communities, some of the most popular expressions of the show have entered common parlance in their English version as for example 'Sashay away', although in the first translated version (subtitled) RuPaul's catchphrase to eliminate a contestant had been adapted into 'ahi, ahi, te ne vai' ('oh dear, bye, you go away'). The opposite expression to invite people to stay 'Shantay you stay' and other expressions as 'throwing some shade', meaning criticizing, or 'sickening', meaning fabulous, or 'no tea, no shade', meaning no disrespect, are used in English on Italian blogs.¹⁶ Other expressions like 'adoroooo', have been Italianized but have acquired an hybrid spelling in the process, and some expressions are used as English acronyms like C.U.N.T, with a clear double meaning, but they are spelled out in Italian 'Carisma, Unicità, Nervi Saldi e Talento' ('charisma, uniqueness, good nerves, talent') as the key factors a drag queen needs to have to be a superstar. Comments on *RPDR*'s peculiar language are to be found not only in academic papers but also in Italian newspapers and weekly magazines. *Io donna*, an Italian women's magazine and weekly supplement to the moderate conservative daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, devoted an article to RuPaul's invitation to the 2019 Met Gala, the annual Metropolitan Museum of Art's fundraising event, whose main theme in 2019 happened to be 'Camp: Notes on Fashion'. The journalist discussed RuPaul's participation to the fashion event pointing out that RuPaul was the first drag queen ever to be invited to the glittering event. RuPaul was described as an icon of Camp style who progressively acquired his celebrity status through the success of the 11 seasons of his reality TV show, which is very popular not only in the US but also in the rest of the world, including Italy. The long and detailed fashion column, mentioning RuPaul's early career and rise to success, highlighted how, over the years, the language of the show had moved from niche drag subculture to more 'mainstream' gay slang, enriching it with new expressions which, according to the journalist, can now be easily understood from Brazil to Italy, thanks to the global circulation of the show via television, Netflix and the web:

Drag Race has become a very popular phenomenon of the American Television, and thanks to streaming and the web, also in the rest of the world. It has by now reached a mainstream audience [...] It has launched the career of many and filled up the net with both a supplement of gossip and a new language, a dictionary of expressions which from drag subculture has moved to much of the young gay community, and is comprehensible from São Paulo to Verona.¹⁷

As for the Italian version of *RPDR*, the show has obviously undergone a translation and adaptation process before reaching the target audience. The dubbed version, prepared at first for the Fox Life broadcast and later on for the Netflix release of the last seasons, has been made with a technique termed 'simil-sync' (literally sync-similar) or 'semi-sinc' (literally half-dubbing), which is becoming more and more frequent in the adaptation of non-fiction series into Italian.¹⁸ This form of audiovisual translation (AVT) is a low budget version of conventional dubbing with no lip synchronization, in which dubbing actors do not simply lend neutral voices to their characters, as in documentary film voice-over, but they tend to add some acting as in classical dubbing, while the original dialogue is still slightly audible in the background to provide a sense of authenticity and naturalness. This type of hybrid dubbing, which is considered more cost effective and less time consuming than traditional dubbing by the AVT industry, is also deemed more user-friendly for Italian audiences who are not used to reading subtitles, Italy being traditionally a dubbing country.¹⁹ Yet, this audiovisual translation mode has been received with ambivalent if not contradictory reactions by audiences and scholars alike,²⁰ whose opinions do not seem to be always as positive as the AVT industry would possibly expect, and is generally criticized by some experienced dubbing professionals, who are convinced this translation practice might be to the detriment of quality lip-sync dubbing²¹. As will be discussed in the following examples, in the case of *RPDR* the simil-sync translation mode may even lead to odd, exaggerated, quirky outcomes or unwanted humorous or censoring effects, due to the specific subject of the show.

By reading some of the online comments about the clips in Italian which are available on YouTube, we can infer that most Italian viewers are also familiar with the original version of the show, or at least with the original voices of the *RPDR*'s queens and the dubbed version has definitely a negative impact on their appreciation of the Italian version.²² This non-standard type of dubbing relinquishes audience's traditional suspension of disbelief, thus probably leading to spectators' lack of appreciation of this form of translation and even fierce criticism.²³

1. - *Alyssa in italiano mi ha traumatizzata.*²⁴
- I was traumatized by Alyssa in Italian.
2. - *Oddio che voce di merda che hanno in italiano.*
- Oh my Gosh what a shitty voice they have in Italian.

Some comments are subtly ironical:

3. - *I doppiatori che tentano di fare la voce da gay sono meravigliosi.*
- Dubbing actors trying to perform gay voices are amazing.
4. - *La risata di Jade (Emoji of a skull).*
- Jade's laughter (Emoji of a skull).

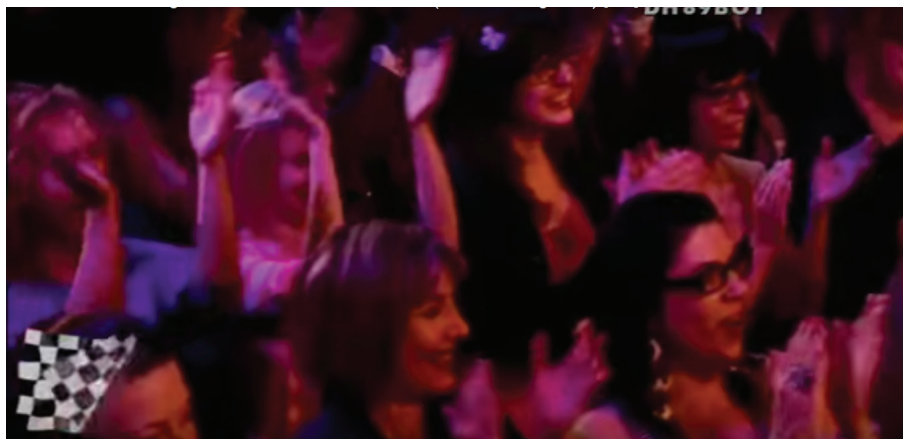
Some other Italian viewers are very negative on the translation and adaptation choices:²⁵

5. - [...] *Si perde TUTTO quello che è la serie, le battute sono storpiate o mancano proprio, la delivery dei doppiatori non fa capire un cazz- E davvero bisognava tradurre "queen"? Cioè se non traducete "drag" perché dovrete tradurre "queen"? Io boh.*
- [...] EVERYTHING of the gist of the series is lost, gags are either distorted, or omitted completely, dubbing actors' delivery doesn't make anything understandable. Was it really necessary to translate "queen"? If you do not translate "drag" why should you translate "queen"? I don't get it.

However, leaving aside the opinion of some dissatisfied viewers, what emerges from a more thorough comparative investigation of the original show and of its Italian dubbed version is that the quality of translation and adaptation underpinning its re-voicing is often very poor. Apart from the fact that low budgets are generally available for translation and adaptation of non-fiction programming, reality TV is typically unscripted, and hence more difficult to decode by translation professionals, to the detriment of the overall quality of the dialogue adaptation. Moreover, much of the entertainment potential of the *RPDR* show is based on verbal and cultural humour, which is undoubtedly very difficult to translate effectively even in scripted comedies.²⁶ On top of that, in the Italian version of the show taboo language and sexual content are unpredictably toned down or omitted, thus reducing both the humorous potential of some of the jokes and their multi-layered cultural implications. Examples of taboo language or sexual allusions that are misinterpreted, toned down or overlooked are numerous in the series. We have just selected here a few examples, extracts from a RuPaul's roast competition in Season 5, Episode 7:

6. - Alaska: You can take a girl out of New Jersey, but you can't keep a girl from giving blow jobs to homos in New Jersey.
- Alaska: *Michelle Visage, una donna può scappare dal New Jersey, ma non puoi impedirle di andare in giro a regalare tette nuove ai senza tetto per il New Jersey.*²⁷
- Alaska: Michelle Visage, a woman can run away from New Jersey, but you can't keep her from going about to give away new tits to homeless people in New Jersey.²⁸
7. - Jinkx Monsoon: Michelle Visage is a woman so full of semen... period. Seriously, she's a whore.
- Jinkx Monsoon: *Michelle Visage è una donna così piena di... sperma. Dico sul serio è una puttana.*²⁹
- Jinkx Monsoon: Michelle Visage is a woman so full of... sperm. Seriously, she's a whore.

In excerpt 6, the Italian adaptation substitutes the connoted term 'girl' with the general term 'woman', and arbitrarily changes 'blow jobs to homos' with 'new tits to homeless people', completely losing the hint to the ambiguous sexual identity of Michelle Visage. In excerpt 7, the pun around the word "period" is lost, and so is the gag on Michelle Visage's gender uncertainty.



Video 7. An example of Italian language's simil-sync of *RPDR*

To sum up, despite the complexity of the language and of the cultural issues covered by *RPDR*, the overall translation and adaptation strategy suffers from a lack of quality standards that are granted to fictional and more in general to mainstream programs. This in turn has may have caused many Italian unsatisfied viewers to watch the original version. However, the niche audience the program targets probably does not allow for the adoption of a different, more expensive, translation policy by broadcasters.

4 The Pop Side of Drag: The Italian Reception of the Show

RPDR is a complex product, one that operates on many industrial levels, impacting on cultural and even political ones. This brings us to ask one important question: what to take into consideration when examining its reception? Aside from its institutional presence with official accounts on the main social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), it has become a phenomenon in popular culture, suffice it to cite the meme-isation of its most famous catchphrases. However, in this section we want to focus on another, more unique aspect of the show, that is its more practical effects on the visibility and perception of the drag and LGBTQIA+ community in Italy.

In cultural analyses of the show, debates have sparked on matters as representation, subjectivity, subversive subcultures and mainstream popularity. On the critical side of reception, *RPDR* has been accused of gender-bending exploitation,³⁰ neoliberal appropriation of drag culture, and a general loss of the drag community's political agency.³¹ It must be noted that drag as a subversive force is not a flawless notion in itself, as Judith Butler points out with regards to gender performativity within hegemonic structures.³² About that, Eir-Anne Edgar argues that *RPDR* does not properly recognizes or rewards the complexity of drag performances, ultimately limiting its scope to entertainment without providing any further progress for drag culture.³³ However, among those who praise the show, the main argument is that it "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".³⁴ In fact, the series aims at raising awareness by tackling current issues of bigotry and oppression and by incorporating some of the milestones of American LGBTQ history into its episodes. Also, we get to know some of the contestants' personal histories of marginalization, with a clear political aim of equality for LGBTQIA+ people. Importantly, on this matter Brennan and Gudelunas argue that:

Despite its US-centrism [...] *[RPDR]* has made drag queens and drag culture infinitely more accessible to American and global audiences. For American LGBTQ viewers located far from the gay meccas of New York, Chicago, San Francisco or Los Angeles, and for straight viewers who would not consider attending a drag act, *[RPDR]* provides an up-close, even technical view of what drag entails.³⁵

The overflow of *Drag Race* into reality puts a new spotlight on drag culture and steered the discourse towards positivity, inclusivity and empowerment – especially on the press that targets precise audience segments, broadly, those interested in new media, pop culture, entertainment world, and so on. For instance, on *Wired Italia*, Paolo Armelli talks about it as a soul-soothing talent show, one that not only redeems the reality TV genre but that also stands as a lesson against homophobia – it is not by chance that the article was published on the International Day Against Homophobia.³⁶ Simone Stefanini, on *Daily Best*, underlines its authenticity and overall message of respect for diversity, on top of its being inherently entertaining.³⁷ On *The Vision*, Jennifer Guerra duly retraces the milestones, achievements and difficulties of the drag community and recognizes that the series is problematic when it comes to race representation; however, she describes it as an honest show that finally, in Italy too, raised awareness on the drag culture in all its aspects.³⁸

Whether *Drag Race* fostered a new sensitivity towards the drag and LGBTQIA+ community in Italy is yet to be determined. However, as part of a larger global pattern that sees increasingly sensitivity and awareness towards LGBTQIA+ issues and that is also promoted by shows like *RPDR*, there is no doubt that the show resulted into at least two observable social phenomena, although still confined within a niche-reach (that will be better explored in the next section). On the one hand, there is a ‘celebrity-factor’, that is winners and contestants of the series becoming marketable celebrities. It is the case, for instance, of Sasha Velour, the winner of the ninth edition, that hosted a sold-out show at Club Q21 in Milan on September 2018. The event became a must-see for the show’s fans and the gay press, above all, devoted a great deal of attention to it, with interviews and enthusiastic critical reviews.³⁹ On the other hand, once the celebrity-factor poured into drag culture (and the club culture, especially in Milan), it gave way to a popularization of drag art and performances, turning them into a sort of “genre” for thematic events. In 2015, the Arizona 2000 balera (a club devoted to dancing nights) in Milan started offering, every two weeks, a special event called La Boum, which has now gained a prominent spot in the Milan nightlife culture. Every Friday, La Boum offers drag performances within a dancing party scored by hit-pop music. The nights feature different themes, but with the common thread of glam, irony and a willingness to bring people together in a diverse social event, ideally with no labels attached.

Caught worldwide between the ‘Yes Team’ and the ‘No Team’, in Italy *RPDR* has been received by the media in a positive way, mostly as a new outpost for inclusivity and empowerment. When it comes to the general audience, it seems to polarize fans of the show, a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and people just looking for a special, out-of-the-ordinary night – especially with events such as La Boum, that combines drag culture and the Milanese nightlife. Although the most critical views of the show persist, in Italy *Drag Race* seems therefore more bent towards the mainstream than the subversive, by showing a “pop side” of drag based on marketability and glamour, in a naturalized relation between the (sub)culture, the show’s brand and consumption practices, without losing a certain social relevance.

5 Cult Following: Italian LGBTQIA+ and Drag Cultures

The reputation of RuPaul as the most famous drag queen of all times is internationally undisputed. As for Italy, he is less well known than elsewhere, but it is quite manifest – as emerged from some sources interviewed for this article⁴⁰ – that he represents a reference model for the Italian LGBTQIA+ and drag culture, although his role needs to be explored in further detail.

As seen in a previous section, the very first appearance of RuPaul on Italian TV dates back to 1994, so partly explaining the Italian attention to *RPDR*. He participated to the Italian song contest *Festival di Sanremo*,⁴¹ singing in a duo with Elton John. Back then, Italian media framed him as a “transvestite” – the word *drag* not being used yet – while the host, Pippo Baudo, a well-known Italian presenter, visibly embarrassed, uttered the English expression “Life is strange!” after the performance. Despite his increasing success and popularity, especially after Netflix acquisition of

RPDR, the data emerging today show that in Italy *RPDR* has a cult following, but quite limited, starting from the narrow availability – on the Internet and on visual social media – of particularly frequented fandom places. Some Italian YouTube make *RPDR* a topic of discussion and sharing: Matteo Fumagalli (@mattfumagalli) is one of the most well-known Italian book influencers (or booktubers), and he has dedicated more than one video, as well as various Twitter posts, to *RPDR*.



Video 8. Matteo Fumagalli on *RPDR*.

In the video, we can listen to a free conversation about the show, where Fumagalli shows an in-depth competence, describing several characters. It could be considered a vision suggestion for newbies, but at the same time it is evident that he is sharing something which is widely known by his followers, as demonstrated by the large number of comments to his post. Or we have Queergin, a youtuber explicitly connected to a queer point of view, who has long been making his own reviews on *RPDR*, calling them *Queeruvies*. At first those reviews were presented in Italian, but since the last season they are in English.



Video 9. VergineDiOrecchie's *Ruviews*.

These are real, detailed reviews: each episode is devoted a video and the comment is accompanied by some clips of the show. However, these videos have a limited follow-up: on average, only a few thousand views. There are also some female youtubers talking about the subject, such as BarbieXanaxFactory or Ruby Rust. Overall, though, these events reach very limited numbers.

Video 10. A Ruby Rust's video on *RPDR*.

The scarce reputation of *RPDR* often becomes, with regret, an explicit issue in the comments of the viewers. Predictably, it is within the LGBTQIA+ culture that the show finds the largest response. Evidence shows that the program's popularity within the LGBTQIA+ community is such that some of its buzzwords have recently been used with a political agenda. During the Roma Pride Parade, held on 8 June 2019, various choirs "Sashay Away", the expression used by RuPaul to say to a competitor to get off the catwalk,⁴² were dedicated to Matteo Salvini, former minister and the political leader of an Italian right-wing party: "Salvini Sashay Away!". Moreover, Nocoldiz, a well-known comedian youtuber, devoted a so-called YouTube *Poop* to Salvini again⁴³, titling it "Salvini's Drag Race", using edited *RPDR* scenes ironically, and dubbing RuPaul with fragments of aggressive and politically incorrect language extrapolated from Salvini's speeches.

Video 11. *Salvini's Drag Race* ironic video.

It is clear here that the provocative juxtaposition of the two characters is widely shared, due to their opposing positions with respect to identity policies. This proves that RuPaul has also taken on the role of an LGBTQIA+ icon in Italy, and therefore this very area may be further researched.

RPDR is mentioned as a show that promotes LGBTQIA+ rights within university associations' websites,⁴⁴ as the program is valued in LGBTQIA+ culture sites, such as BitchyF, usually dedicated to media and gossip contents. The reverse happens with "opponents" such as conservative associations, which identify RuPaul with moral degradation and the imposition of what they call a "gender diktat".⁴⁵ This further reaffirms RuPaul's iconic role as a representative of the entire LGBTQIA+ world, from every opposite perspective⁴⁶. In a recent interview published by an association for the promotion of cultural diversity, an Italian drag queen, Carla Stracci, summarized her vision as follows:

*RuPaul's Drag Race is the world's most famous talent show for drag queens. It was born in America, in a culture often far from ours. We ourselves as Italian drag queens look at the show, and we follow it to inspire us and see what the trends are. [...] RuPaul made a contribution in terms of openness and pop visibility regarding the figure of drag queens. When he came to Italy with Elton John at the *Sanremo Festival* to present a song, he was partly scandalous because for our country it was a "novelty" but at the same time helped make this phenomenon more "pop".⁴⁷*

The point of view of Italian drag queens is very relevant, and on this topic it is interesting to acquire first hand sources, with an ethnographic approach. In this respect, a work dedicated to Milan's drag queens, carried out by Marcello Francioni in 2013, is worth mentioning. The researcher managed to be progressively accepted by the drag queen community (as a fan of the show) and to conduct a participant-observation study on Milan's drag queens relational, artistic and political life.⁴⁸ From his research work, it clearly emerges that, for Milan's drag queens, *RPDR* constitutes a sort of reference performance format, from which inferring the trends, both in terms of visual lay-out, and presence on stage. RuPaul himself represents a sort of unattainable model everyone looks to for inspiration, going so far as to affirm that *RPDR* is a sort of "dream of life".⁴⁹ Francioni notes today⁵⁰ that current media visual communication is leading to a sort of style standardization in drag queens, especially for the younger ones, who tend to look more and more like media models that, starting with *RPDR*, proliferate individually through their social media profiles, such as on Instagram.

The issue was also mentioned in an interview we had with Mario Di Martino,⁵¹ who gave us another interesting point of view on RuPaul's reality show, starting with the popularity of *RPDR* on a mainstream level.⁵² Approximately, until the fifth and sixth seasons – Mario affirms –, the show was hyper-targeted and strongly community-based, also employing a specific *camp* language, with internal LGBTQIA+ culture themes, in particular drag and trans, even triggering internal criticism within the same community for an excess of transphobia. The transition to the more mainstream VH1 network changed its character, but at the same time greatly increased its notoriety, making *RPDR* the reference "bible" for drag queens, hence the discussion on the opportunity to use a media reference model with its inevitable downside of uniformity and standardization. Expressing one's own individual creativity is a constituent part of the DNA of performance drag, as well as their popular and radical roots, closely linked to specific local 'scenes', or to the tribe of a single club. But all this is denied by the affirmation of universal reference models.⁵³ For drag queen communities *RPDR* represents a real model of life, keeping in mind that doing drag is a very complex and variable process depending on the different choices, but that involves a very profound identity mode that goes beyond mere dressing up.⁵⁴

However, the show maintains in Italy a strong following that has also been passed on to the new generations, although these forms of fandom are hardly visible. Much of the hype on the show, indeed, goes through social networks such as Telegram or Whatsapp, used to share information and opinions on new episodes, in a way specifically designed not to be publicly visible.⁵⁵ That confirms the hypothesis of a show extremely followed by a restricted community. Moreover, in the final episode of the last season, RuPaul explicitly dedicated a tribute to the community to which he owes his success, declaring himself pleased that *RPDR* is a "show of queer people, by queer people and for queer people [that] has won nine Grammy Awards" (season 11, episode 11).

RuPaul and the show are currently the object of a real cult in Italy, still followed by a very narrow niche of audience,⁵⁶ while the reality competition has not yet intercepted a wide interest. As shown in the previous section, this is also

evidenced by many recent articles in which shrewd Italian columnists continue to strongly urge the public to notice this "hidden treasure", considering, already in the titles, the necessary use of strict 'deontic' modalities ("we all *should* see" or "everyone *should* look at").⁵⁷ Followers, however, tends to grow, as shown by the tours that some drag queens emerged from *RPDR* are making around the world, Italy included.

6 Conclusions

TV show, reality competition, global phenomenon, celebrity-factory, catchphrases-maker, neoliberal appropriator of drag culture, empowerment outpost: throughout this article, we have referred to *RPDR* in many ways, ranging from its television genre to its political charge and significance regarding contemporary society and drag culture. Indeed, given all these aspects, the analysis of the show called for a diverse perspective, trying to consider not only its multifaceted nature, but also its transformation when it comes to global circulation – and, in our specific case, when it comes to Italian distribution.

With an in-depth look at the paths of circulation and processes of mediations that led RuPaul and *RPDR* to cultural credibility in Italy, the first two paragraphs have brought to the fore one important issue: that of the TV genre. Reality television, in its various forms and formats, has always been a deprecated genre, one connected to traditionally commercial television, a schedule-filler not worth of critical attention or scrutiny. Things are changing and many cases have proved this conception wrong.⁵⁸ Particularly at the beginning of its Italian journey, *RPDR*'s genre seemed to be to its detriment – along with the still untested effect of its content on the contemporary Italian audience. As broadcast by Fox Italia, the show was initially employed as a minor asset, with summer schedules, late night slots and a change of title to make it catchier. As a consequence, as it pertains to dubbing (or better, simil-sync), like the most of imported reality shows, *RPDR* suffered from a lack of quality standards that are generally granted to fictional mainstream products – a quality that usually grants them more accessibility among a wider audience. Furthermore, much of the entertaining potential of the *RPDR* show is based on verbal and cultural humour, which is hard to properly translate (and to communicate) in Italian.

Despite this, the third and fourth paragraph have highlighted the show's relevance and persistence within a niche following, one that is familiar with the original version of the show and that, arguably, was loyal even before its Italian debut. Despite still being at the centre of a debate regarding the loss of the subversive power of drag culture within mainstream popularity, *RPDR* has proved to be an asset for the visibility of drag performers and for the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as a successful marketing tool for related events, like the contestants' shows and the rise of places like La Boum, for which *RPDR* constitutes a sort of reference performance format. What we have called the "pop side" of drag, however, does not entirely collide with its political charge, as *RPDR* is valued in LGBTQIA+ culture sites and some of its buzzwords have been used to criticize the political agenda of former minister Matteo Salvini, during the 2019 Roma Pride.⁵⁹

As we have seen, the national mediations of *RPDR* (and everything the show stands for) has been challenging and had to go through industrial, social and cultural variables. In fact, let us remind ourselves again that RuPaul's relation with Italy actually started well before the show itself, with his underappreciated appearance at the *Festival di Sanremo* in 1994. Along with the failure of the program *Tacchi a spillo*, that untimely Italian debut would be enough to explore the dynamics of a television industry and a society that were still not ready (or ripe enough) to understand what back then was not only a new and transgressive kind of entertainment, but also a mocked one. Certainly, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has proved that a lot has changed on many levels, also in Italy, and that critical reception as well as audience success are dependent on external factors and national mediation processes as much as on product quality.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. Luca Barra, "The Mediation is the Message. Italian Regionalization of US TV Series as Co-creational Work," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 5 (2009): 509-25; Luca Barra, "Invisible Mediations. The Role of Adaptation and Dubbing Professionals in Shaping US TV for Italian Audiences," *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2013): 101-11.
2. Media Industry Studies are often crucial in highlighting production and distribution routines, describing professionals, hierarchies and logics: see for instance John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture. Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Vicky Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies. Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (London: Routledge, 2009); Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicky Mayer, eds., *Production Studies, The Sequel! Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries* (London: Routledge, 2015); Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo, eds., *Making Media Work. Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *Behind the Screen. Inside European Production Cultures* (London: Palgrave, 2013); Luca Barra, Tiziano Bonini, and Sergio Splendore, eds., *Backstage. Studi sulla produzione dei media in Italia* [Backstage. Studies on Italian Media Production] (Milan: Unicopli, 2016).
3. See Denise D. Bielby and Christina L. Harrington, *Global TV. Exporting Television and Culture in the World Market* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI, 2006).
4. See, among a large body of works, especially in the field of Translation Studies and from a linguistic perspective, Jorge Díaz Cintas, ed., *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009).
5. On branding, see for instance Catherine Johnson and Paul Grainge, *Promotional Screen Industries* (London: Routledge, 2015).
6. For instance, Dearball Jordan, "Why RuPaul's Drag Race is Big Business," *BBC News*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-44335007>
7. On Fox Life and other "women's channels" in Italy, Cecilia Penati and Anna Sfondini, *La tv delle donne* [Women's Television] (Milan: Unicopli, 2015).
8. *America's Next Top Model* was indeed an inspiration for *RPDR*, and the shows have some common traits, as often shown in Niall Brennan and David Gidelunas, eds., *RuPaul's Drag Race and The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2017).
9. Silvia Fumarola, "Aspiranti drag queen ora la scena è vostra" [Wannabe drag queens, now the stage is yours], *La Repubblica*, July 9, 2011, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2011/07/09/aspiranti-drag-queen-ora-la-scena-vostra.html>
10. See Luca Barra, "On Demand Isn't Built in a Day: Promotional Rhetoric and the Challenges of Netflix's Arrival in Italy," *Cinéma&Cie. International Film Studies Journal* 17, no. 29 (2017): 19-32.
11. Nick Duffy, "It's the RuPocalypse! Most of Drag Race is disappearing from Netflix and we are not OK," *PinkNews*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/04/17/rupauls-drag-race-leaving-netflix-uk-streaming-stream/>
12. Manuel Betancourt, "The Rise of RuPaul's Drag Industrial Complex," *Vice*, March 24, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3dmpdw/the-rise-of-rupauls-drag-industrial-complex
13. "Netflix si svela: in Italia 2 milioni di abbonati, nuova sede, tasse e investimenti per 200 milioni" [Netflix unveiled: in Italy 2 millions of subscribers, a new place, taxes and investments for 200 millions], *Prima*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.primaonline.it/2019/10/08/295411/netflix-svela-dati-e-programmi-per-litalia-hastings-2-milioni-di-abbonati-nuova-sede-tasse-e-investimenti-per-200-milioni-importante-partnership-con-mediaset/>

14. See, for instance, some dedicated [Wikipedia pages](#).
15. Nathaniel Simmons, "Speaking Like a Queen in *RuPaul's Drag Race*: Towards a Speech Code of American Drag Queens," *Sexuality & Culture* 17, no. 4 (2013).
16. Paolo Armelli, "Omofobia, perché tutti dovremmo vedere *RuPaul's Drag Race*" [Homophobia, why we should all see *RuPaul's Drag Race*], *Wired Italia*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.wired.it/play/televisione/2018/05/17/rupaul-drag-race-omofobia/>
17. Cristiano Vitali, "Met Gala 2019, RuPaul è la prima drag queen invitata della storia. E ci va vestito da uomo" [Met Gala 2019, RuPaul is the first drag queen ever invited in history. And he is going dressed as a man], *Io donna*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.iodonna.it/spettacoli/tv/2019/05/07/met-gala-2019-rupaul-e-la-prima-drag-queen-invitata-della-storia-e-ci-va-vestito-da-uomo/>. The translation into English of the Italian excerpt has been provided by the authors.
18. Angela Sileo, "Il simil-sync o semi-sync nel panorama italiano. Lo slittamento e offuscamento dei confini previsti dal CCNL" [Simil-sync or semi-sync in the Italian landscape. Slipping and blurring of the boundaries set in Italian collective agreements], *Altre modernità* 2, (2018): 258-67.
19. Elisa Perego, *La traduzione audiovisiva* [Audiovisual translation] (Roma: Carocci, 2005).
20. See Linda Rossato, "[Good Food, Good Fun: an Audience Consumption and Perception of TV Cookery Programmes](#)," *Intralinea*, (2014); Sileo, "Il simil-sync".
21. See Giovanni Rampazzo, "Similsync and reversioning: nuove frontiere o nuove economie del doppiaggio?" [Similsync and reversioning: new frontiers or new economies of dubbing?], *Asinc* 25, May 15, 2013, http://www.asinc.it/as_01_066.asp
22. See [America's next Drag Queen 5. Ingresso delle Queens \(RuPaul's Drag Race\) \(ITA\)](#).
23. Rampazzo, "Similsync and reversioning".
24. Translation of excerpts from (1) to (5) have been provided by the authors.
25. Cfr. [America's Next Drag Queen 5 - Burliamoci di RuPaul \(RuPaul's Drag Race\) \(ITA\)](#).
26. Delia Chiaro, "The Effect of Translation on Humour Response: The Case of Dubbed Comedy in Italy", in *Doubts and Directions in Translation Studies*, eds. Yves Gambier, Miriam Shlesinger, and Radegundis Stolze (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 137-52.
27. Italian dubbed version for Fox Life.
28. The back translation of excerpts 6 and 7 dubbed version is provided by the authors.
29. Italian dubbed version for Fox Life.
30. On gender-bending exploitation on television, see Britta Hanson, "Miniskirts and Wigs: The Gender Politics of Cross-Dressing on *Lip Sync Battle*," *Flow*, July 5, 2016, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2016/07/cross-dressing-lip-sync-battle/>
31. See Niall Brennan, "Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and *RuPaul's Drag Race*," in *RuPaul's Drag Race and The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, eds. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (London: Palgrave, 2017), 42.
32. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 125.
33. Eir-Anne Edgar, "'Xtravaganza!': Drag Representation and Articulation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*," *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2011): 145.
34. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, "Drag Culture, Global Participation and *RuPaul's Drag Race*," in *RuPaul's Drag Race and The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*, eds. Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas (London: Palgrave, 2017), 3.
35. Ibid., 4.
36. Armelli, "Omofobia".
37. Simone Stefanini, "Perché RuPaul's Drag Race è il talent migliore di tutti" ["Why RuPaul's Drag Race is the best talent show of all"], *Daily Best*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.dailybest.it/tv-cinema/rupaul-talent-drag-queen/>
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39. Marco Torcasio, "Sasha Velour a Milano, la magia della Drag Art fa sold out" ["Sasha Velour in Milan, Drag Art's magic goes sold out"], *Gay.it*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.gay.it/attualita/news/sasha-velour-drag-milano-intervista>
40. Mario Di Martino, Interview with authors, July 25, 2019; Marcello Francioni, Skype interview with authors, July 16, 2019.
41. *Festival di Sanremo* also served as a format for the Eurovision Song Contest. See Dafni Tragaki, ed., *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 2013), xi.
42. Sharn Rayment, "The Dictionary According to RuPaul's Drag Race," *i-D Magazine*, June 22, 2017, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/wjnqeb/rupaul-drag-race-dictionary
43. The video is available only on Facebook, since Nocoldiz's account some months ago has been suspended by YouTube, "due to repeated or severe violations" of Community Guidelines.
44. Maurizio Riccio, 'RuPaul's Drag Race', [bullismoomofobico.it](http://www.bullismoomofobico.it), no date, http://www.sinapsi.unina.it/recensionerupaul_bullismoomofobico; Gabriele Sani, "Drag Queen e Drag King. L'arte che esprime quella parte negata di sé" [Drag queen and drag king. Art expressing a refused part of self], *Parmateneo*, October 30, 2018, <http://www.parmateneo.it/?p=45459>
45. Chiara Chiessi, "La nuova frontiera LGBT: i drag kids" [A new LGBT's frontier: drag kids], *Osservatorio Gender*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.osservatoriogender.it/la-nuova-frontiera-lgbt-i-drag-kids/>

46. Brennan and Gudelunas, *RuPaul's Drag Race and The Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*.
47. Valentina Colombo, "Carla Stracci, drag queen: Il modo più libero con cui posso esprimermi" [Carla Stracci, drag queen: The freest way I can express myself], *Sguardi di confine*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.sguardidiconfine.com/carla-stacchi-drag-queen-il-modo-piu-libero-per-esprimermi/> Translated by the authors.
48. Marcello Francioni, *È un attimo. Relazionalità, performance e politica tra le drag queen di Milano* [It's a moment. Relationality, performance and politics among Milan's drag queens], Master's Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia (2013), 21.
49. Ibid., 192.
50. Marcello Francioni, Skype interview with authors, July 16, 2019.
51. Mario Di Martino is vice president and art director of **MIT (Movimento Identità Trans)**.
52. Mario Di Martino, Interview with authors, July 25, 2019.
53. Ibid.
54. Katie R. Horowitz, "The Trouble with Queerness" Drag and the Making of Two Cultures", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 2 (2013): 305.
55. Di Martino, Interview.
56. In the USA *RPDR* is the fourth most viewed program in the LGBTQIA+ community, according to Nielsen. See Riccardo Cristilli, "Game of Thrones vola negli ascolti LGBTQ secondo la prima rilevazione settimanale Nielsen" [Game of Thrones is strong in LGBT ratings, according to the first weekly Nielsen measurement], *TvBlog*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.tvblog.it/post/1647705/game-of-thrones-ascolti-gay-ascolti-lgbtq-nielsen-novita>
57. Guerra, "RuPaul's Drag Race come antidoto all'orrore dei tempi moderni"; Armelli, "Omofobia"; Fabiana Fanelli, "RuPaul's Drag Race: il Reality che tutti dovrebbero guardare" [RuPaul's Drag Race: the Reality show everybody should watch], October 19, 2018, <https://www.hallofseries.com/reality/reality-rupauls-drag-race/>
58. For instance, Michael L. Wayne argues that A&E's most successful reality shows are dependent upon their ability to become an appropriate form of upper-middle-class leisure and that they do so by distancing themselves from the most devalued characteristics of the genre, see Michael L. Wayne, "Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation: Exploring High-Status Reality TV in the Post Network Era," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 5 (2015): 990-1009. On reality television and queerness, Kathleen LeBesco notes that contemporary reality TV "has been applauded for ushering in a new era of inclusive, 'real,' and diverse representations of queer sexuality" (Kathleen LeBesco, "Got to Be Real," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette [New York: New York University Press, 2004], 271). As for the audiences of reality television, Annette Hill moves away from the image of the 'couch-potato' and argues that reality TV audiences are actually engaged in a critical examination of the development of popular factual television (Annette Hill, *Audiences and Popular Factual Television* [New York/London: Routledge 2005]).
59. This consideration also suggests that there might be a lot more to be said about audience studies, and especially about how, in Italy, RuPaul as an individual has come to eventually represent the show, but how this was achieved through audience activity rather than promotional strategies – as it was the case of the UK and the US.

Biographies

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