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“OH MY, THEY JUST NEED A DRAG QUEEN”. SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH EMOTIONS AND STORYTELLING IN EXTRACULTURAL DRAG PERFORMANCE

Abstract

In Poland, the art of drag is emerging in new spaces and entering mainstream culture. Drag performances are not only a form of artistic expression but can also serve as a way of demonstrating the social and cultural values of the queer community. They may become a tool of emancipation and a means of activist engagement. The primary objective of this article is to provide an analysis of extracultural drag performance through the theoretical framework of Jeffrey Alexander’s macro-sociological model of social action as a form of cultural performance. The study is based on qualitative research, comprising in-depth individual interviews with non-binary people, men, and women who perform on the Polish drag scene. Extracultural drag performance is directed at people outside the queer community and aims to draw attention to the social issues faced by non-normative individuals. Artists perceive drag performances as a tool for social change and as a medium through which they can communicate the meaning of their social situation to others. Extracultural drag performance serves to shape social awareness and initiate discursive processes,

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contributing to the redefinition of social imaginaries concerning queer people and provoking reflection on the mechanisms of exclusion.

Keywords: drag performance, drag queen, social change, emotions, storytelling, extracultural performance

INTRODUCTION

As a cultural practice, performance reflects and embodies specific identities, values, worldviews, and modes of knowledge [Madison, Hamera 2005]. It cultivates citizenship and engages democracy as a participatory forum, where participants exchange ideas and explore possibilities for social equity and justice [Dolan 2001]. Furthermore, performances transmit social knowledge and memories, articulate political claims, and express a collective sense of identity [Taylor 2003; Alexander 2006a]. Drag performance can also serve as a medium for conveying meanings and values, a perspective that various scholars have examined. For example, Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson [2005] analyse drag performance as an intentional protest action in which bodies, identities, symbols, discourses, and practices are used to challenge and transform institutionalised power relations, and Stoch [2024] describes a case study of Polish drag queen Mona Lizak, focusing on political messaging in their drag activity in the context of the commercialisation of drag in Poland. The activism of Polish drag performers is also addressed in Wojtaszczyk's book [2022] and in Stasik's [2015] study of Polish drag kings. Taylor and Rupp [2006] describe the educational potential of drag shows directed towards heterogeneous audiences and the desire of drag queens to provoke social change through their artistic activity. Drag performance is also analysed as a form of social advocacy and a tool to challenge cultural norms beyond the queer community [Balint et al. 2026]. Berbary and Johnson [2016] describe the drag kings' aspirations for their performances to have an activist character, challenge audiences' normative expectations, and encourage viewers to adopt more inclusive perspectives. Brennan [2022] analyses how transgender drag artists from RuPaul Drag Race use their platform on social media for political advocacy. Johnston [2012], in a study focused on touch and haptic geographies in drag shows, mentions that drag queens use performance as a strategic form of political expression through music, comedy, satire, and humour. Another study explores how drag queens deploy music to evoke emotional responses in their audiences to educate heterosexual spectators and to facilitate understanding of "gay

life” for mainstream audiences [Kaminski, Taylor 2008]. Drag is a performative practice that combines entertainment, politics, and the expression of non-normative identities, challenging established norms of gender and sexuality [Taylor et al. 2005; Kaminski, Taylor 2008; Rogers 2018; Litwiller 2020;].

Some authors have defined drag queens as cisgender queer men who perform in women’s attire, and drag kings as cisgender women who perform masculinity on stage [Hopkins 2004; Majka-Rostek 2010]. However, contemporary drag culture moves beyond impersonification of the opposite gender, enabling diverse individuals to engage in artistic expression through drag performance. During the performances, drag artists typically wear elaborate clothing, hair, and makeup. Drag shows can include, inter alia, lip-syncing, live singing, dance, acrobatics, or comedy [Szymańska 2020]. In recent years, drag performances have gained increasing visibility in Polish popular culture. Over the past decade, drag queens have been occasionally invited to television’s morning show *Dzień Dobry TVN* to share their experiences. Drag is also the focus of the Polish miniseries *Queen* on Netflix [2022] and the documentary *Nago. Głośno. Dumnie.* [2023], and *Boylesque* [2022]. Furthermore, drag queen Twoja Stara participated as an expert in the 13th edition of Polish *Top Model* [2024] and the drag talent show *Czas na show*. Also, *Drag Me Out* streamed on TVN, one of the biggest Polish television stations [2024]. The growing popularisation of drag within mainstream culture gives performers greater visibility and new opportunities to share their art with a broader audience. This, in turn, prompts reflection not only on the form and content of drag performances but also on the audience they are directed at, and what socio-political ambitions can be realised at that time.

In this context, this study aims to explore the following research questions: How do drag artists communicate their social and cultural values through drag performances to diverse audiences? How do queer performances such as drag shows contribute to the emancipation processes of the LGBTQ+ community? How do respondents perceive their artistic activity to affect the visibility of their social group? In the search for answers to these questions, empirical data from in-depth individual interviews with Polish drag performers and participant observations during drag shows were used. The theoretical framework applied to the analysis and interpretation of the empirical data is Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of cultural performance, which facilitates a detailed analysis of the individual dimensions of drag performances. An approximation of J. Alexander’s approach is presented in the theoretical section. The research methodology, analysis of empirical data, and discussion of the results comprise the subsequent parts of the article.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the present study, drag performance will be analysed from the perspective of Jeffrey Alexander's macro-sociological model of social action as cultural performance. Rather than analysing the construction of the Other and the reproduction of exclusionary mechanisms through the binary discourses that form part of Alexander's theory [Alexander 2006c], this article focuses on the emancipatory potential of drag as a cultural performance and demonstrates that artists can employ drag performance as a means of communicating their social situation to others.² The cultural-pragmatic model is a valuable tool for analysing symbolic action, social conflict, solidarity, social critique, and political responsibility. The model emphasises cultural structures within which performances take place and are interpreted by audiences [Alexander 2013], and it enriches political and sociological perspectives by incorporating a performative dimension [Alexander 2006a]. Alexander also emphasizes that performance is not only a social and cultural process but also a political one, playing a crucial role in the pluralisation of power and the democratisation of society [Alexander 2011]. Jeffrey Alexander [2006a] describes cultural performance as a social process through which actors present to others the meaning of their social situation. Actors convey meanings which they consciously or unconsciously wish others to believe. A cultural performance is successful when it is perceived by the audience as authentic, and when the viewers accept the motives and explanations presented by the actors.

Audience members decode the meanings encoded by the actors in various ways. If the cultural text is presented convincingly, the audience may begin to identify with the characters portrayed on stage, leading to a cultural extension from actors onto the viewers. Whether a performance is perceived as authentic depends on the skilful integration of all its elements into a coherent whole. In a successful cultural performance, the constituent elements—the actors, the audience, background collective representations, script, social power, means of symbolic production, and *mise en scène*—become inseparable and invisible. In Alexander's macro-sociological model, collective representations function as a system of broadly shared and understood meanings, symbols, and narratives that constitute the background for every cultural performance. Actors employ particular subsets of collective representations to construct a script. The *mise en scène* is a staging of the cultural performance that involves the embodiment of the

² The concept of *iconic power* [Alexander 2012], though important in relation to drag performance, is beyond the scope of this text and is therefore not included in the present analysis.

script on stage through physical and verbal gestures. Actors are individuals who utilise collective representations to convey meanings and project emotions onto their audience. The audience, in turn, refers to the people who are the recipients of the performative action; the success of cultural performance depends on their identification with the meanings projected by the actors. The means of symbolic production include material objects that enable symbolic projection, as well as access to media and performance spaces. Cultural performances are further shaped by the distribution of social power within society, which determines access to the means of symbolic production and the legitimisation of performative action [Alexander 2006a].

Drag performance, when analysed through the theoretical framework of Jeffrey Alexander's model, can be interpreted not only as an expression of individual artistic creativity but also as a cultural performance embedded within a broader social context. Cultural performances, such as drag, project specific meanings onto audiences by drawing upon pre-existing structures of meaning. Within the performance, meanings are selected and reorganised; they do not exist in a vacuum but relate directly to social life [Alexander 2006b]. Applying Alexander's model, which integrates aesthetic, cultural and social dimensions, makes it possible to analyse how drag artists, through their performances, communicate the values of the queer community and involve audiences in the process of meaning-making. Alexander's theoretical framework enables the analysis of how symbols, space, and emotions are employed by drag artists in their performances to construct new social meanings and challenge dominant cultural narratives [Alexander 2006a]. The model allows for an examination of artistic activity itself alongside its social and symbolic functions, including its broader emancipatory potential. Muñoz [1999], in the context of queer performances, describes disidentification as a process of engaging with collective meanings and codes that are typically part of heteronormative discourses and reworking them. Rather than simply exposing the dominant codes, queer artists transform them through disidentification to express marginalised politics and positionality that dominant culture has deemed unthinkable [Muñoz 1999]. By referencing universal codes, emotions, and narratives, drag performers can resonate with broader audiences, including heteronormative spectators. This paper demonstrates that artists can employ drag performance as a means of communicating their social situation to others.

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

The study employed qualitative methods consistent with the constructivist paradigm, which emphasise the subjective perceptions of reality and the authentic representations of individuals' lives within their cultural frameworks rather than the objective representation of events [Given 2008]; these methods also allow an exploration of the chosen issue within its specific local, social, cultural, and historical settings, highlighting how these shape individual experiences [Zybertowicz 2001]. To maintain research ethics [Allmark et al. 2009] all in-depth individual interviews were conducted with participants after they had given their informed consent, and all identifying data about individuals were anonymised. Twenty-two participants from the Polish drag scene were selected purposefully based on availability, with recruitment conducted through the social media platform Instagram. The following selection criteria were applied during recruitment: adults performing on the Polish drag scene, with at least one year of experience. Given the limited number of drag artists, the study employed convenience sampling, recruiting individuals who met the criteria and provided consent to participate. Participants took part in one-to-one interviews to articulate their perspectives, opinions, and beliefs on the research's core focus. The interviews lasted, on average, 1 hour and 10 minutes; the shortest was 31 minutes, and the longest was 2 hours and 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Polish and translated into English by the author. All participants were white individuals, 21 of Polish and one of Ukrainian nationality. The sample included six cis women, eight cis men, six nonbinary people, one person identifying as queer, and one trans woman. At the time of the interviews, the youngest participant was nineteen, and the oldest was thirty-nine, with an average age of twenty-seven. On average, they had over four years of experience on the Polish drag stage, with the most experienced drag performer having ten years of experience and the least having one year. The participant observations were conducted from November 2024 to July 2025 at seven drag events, during which notes were taken and the artists' performances were recorded. The drag shows took place in five locations in two cities. The performances of two drag kings and eighteen drag queens were analysed. Four artists whose performances were part of the observation participated in individual in-depth interviews.

The theoretical framework of Jeffrey Alexander's model facilitated the interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, the analysis of empirical data employed an abductive approach [Timmermans, Tavory 2022]: on the one hand, the dimensions of the theory used served to interpret the data and

categorise the themes derived from the analysis; Alexander’s model informed the identification of the initial codes and themes related to cultural performance, provided the interpretative framework for the empirical data and formed the basis for the structure of this article. On the other hand, the analysis of empirical data had an inductive character, which allowed for the identification of new themes that further developed the applied theoretical approach. Inductive analysis allowed for the ‘embracing of surprises, tensions, and doubts’ [van Hulst, Visser 2025], and the avoidance of a schematic analysis of the data as a result of the utilisation of Alexander’s model. All interviews and recordings from observations were transcribed and coded using an inductive approach. Subsequently, codes were compiled into themes and subthemes. The categories emerging from the empirical data were confronted with the literature and re-analysed, resulting in the identification of two types of drag performance. The final conclusions emerge from a dialogue between theory and empirical data rather than testing prior assumptions [Timmermans, Tavory 2022]. During the research process and data analysis, the author practised conscious reflexivity to reduce potential bias and remain focused on participants’ perspectives [Braun, Clarke 2022; Naeem et al. 2023].

FINDINGS

The drag community is not a homogeneous group; it is formed by individuals with diverse identities and experiences. Participants in this study demonstrated varied approaches to their artistic practice. Some consciously aim to reach new audiences with their art to shape perceptions of drag and LGBTQ+ people, while others limit their performances to their own community, where they feel safe and celebrated. The diversity of the drag artists’ approach to performance raises questions about its role and significance in presenting group values to different types of audiences. Based on the empirical data collected through observations of drag events and in-depth interviews with performers from the Polish drag scene, two types of drag performance were identified. The first type is intracultural performance, aimed at queer audiences, which serves to build community, celebrate non-normative identities, and create safe spaces for queer individuals. The second type is extracultural performance, directed toward audiences outside the queer community to draw attention to the social issues faced by non-heteronormative individuals. Artists perceive extracultural drag performances as a tool for social change and as a form of expression through which they can communicate the significance of their social position to others. Extracultural drag performance serves to shape social awareness and initiate discursive processes. It may contribute

to the reconfiguration of social perceptions of non-heteronormative individuals and encourage reflection on mechanisms of exclusion. In their statements, participants also highlighted the educational potential of drag performances and the importance of reaching new audiences. It is essential to emphasise that not all drag artists feel the need to present their performances to a diverse audience; some focus primarily on engaging with their own communities, without aiming to cater to heteronormative spectators. Nevertheless, several participants expressed a desire to influence the worldview of people outside the LGBTQ+ community, consciously choosing to enter new spaces with the intention of reshaping audience perception of queerness:

Although sometimes I think it's incredibly difficult, because even if I reach, for example, 30 people, well, those 30 people won't be able to do anything anyway, but on the other hand I think that even if I wanted to change the whole world, it would be difficult for me, and reaching at least a certain number of people is still important to me... that someone will be able to understand and see it. [R9]

In recent years, drag has gained increasing visibility within Polish mainstream culture, with drag queens more frequently bringing their art beyond queer spaces in an effort to reach broader audiences. The conceptualisation of extracultural drag performances enables the analysis of this phenomenon, focusing on the intentionality of drag artists and the strategies they employ to communicate their social and cultural values to diverse audiences. Some performers view their artistic activity as a tool for social change, performances as a means to inspire the audience to reflect, and as an opportunity to reshape and challenge societal perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community: “Art has always been a driving force for some changes; art is a universal language and transmits information and ideas, so I believe that art can definitely be the driving force for our queer emancipation” [R6]. Emancipation may be understood as a process of transformation and social change oriented toward the elimination of oppression and the promotion of human freedom, agency, and well-being [Wright 1994; Bhaskar 2009], which aligns with statements in the study that emphasised the emancipatory potential of drag. Participants noted that the artistic and entertaining character of drag facilitates the communication of meanings through performances: “Drag is part of entertainment, so it's a straightforward medium for conveying things. People want to watch it; it is interesting” [R1]. Furthermore, drag performance constitutes a significant form of queer activism with considerable educational potential [Rupp, Taylor 2003]. Similar to other studies [Balint et al. 2026], some drag performers explicitly described drag as a practice through which they seek

to bring awareness to current social issues and provoke a reflection among the audience members:

[Drag gives] the opportunity to, I don't know, make someone aware of something that's happening. For example, you can reflect on something, whether it's the situation of women in the world in general, abortion, or what's happening in the world with the environment, and so on. And I treat that as a form of communication. [R9]

In this article, the findings are organized into three sections, with Table 1 indicating which elements of cultural performance are assigned to each thematic group. The first part, titled “Social change through emotion and storytelling”, focuses on drag artists employing universal emotions, experiences, and narratives in their performances to communicate meanings and values to a broader audience. The second part, “Power relations and access to the production of meanings”, describes drag as a cultural performance within the context of the distribution of power in heteronormative society. The part “Performer and spectator” focuses on the relation between the drag performer and the viewers, and on the reception of performative action by the audience.

TABLE 1. Thematic structure of the article

Thematic group	Elements of cultural performance
Social change through emotion and storytelling	– background cultural representations – script – mise en scène
Power relations and access to the production of meanings	– means of symbolic production – social power
Performer and spectator	– actor – audience

Source: own work.

SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH EMOTION AND STORYTELLING

Alexander [2006a] argues that in every performance presented by an actor, there is a reference to a pre-existing set of collective representations that constitute culture, a set of fundamental narratives and codes. Both collective and personal meanings are sustained through dramatic forms that permeate social life [Alexander 2013]. Drag queens in their performative practices frequently draw upon traditional binary representations of gender, while simultaneously subverting and contesting them, thereby exposing the fluid and performative nature of gender as a social construct [Butler 1999]. Through irony, exaggeration, and camp, they also deconstruct

conventional beauty standards imposed upon femininity. Hyperbole employed in drag can thus serve as a form of social critique [Johnston 2012]. Whether audiences can understand the performance depends on their prior, conscious or unconscious, familiarity with the categories within which the performer operates. In complex societies, audiences possess varying degrees of familiarity with such collective representations [Alexander 2006a]. For this reason, the transmission of meaning tends to be simpler in intracultural drag performance addressed to queer spectators who share experiences and understand LGBTQ+ subculture. By contrast, in extracultural drag performances aimed at broader publics, including heteronormative audiences, the varying levels of familiarity with the collective background representations invoked in drag can pose difficulties in transmitting meanings. Despite its growing presence in mainstream media, drag remains deeply rooted in queer culture. Audience identification with what is being presented by the actors is essential for a cultural performance to succeed. A lack of understanding of references to collective representations grounded in queer culture impedes the process of identification and cultural extension:

I have an impression that [heteronormative people] don't understand it and don't see themselves in it as much, so there's a big issue with this misunderstanding. It's also because we have some sort of unspoken rules within our community. When it comes to language, for example, I don't know, we use gender neutral forms, or some rules about things like touching [...] I think they're also quite lacking in many areas. [R1]

Every meaning in social life exists in relation to other meanings, such as discourses, narratives, and myths. The comprehension of any specific meaning requires an understanding of these interrelated elements [Alexander 2006b]. Performers may undertake strategic actions aimed at increasing the likelihood of a successful projection of meaning onto a heterogeneous audience unfamiliar with queer culture. An awareness of the varying degrees to which spectators are familiar with collective representations enables performers to intentionally reduce the risk of a failed cultural performance by adapting their performative practices: "I try to approach it from the assumption that there might be someone in the audience who came to a drag show for the first time, who is not involved in this culture at all [...] And I try to present this in the clearest way possible" [R11]. Collective background representations shape the interpretations of both actors and audiences. They also enable creative and strategic action grounded in symbolic structures [Alexander 2006b], which makes possible the fusion of elements within drag performance. The identification with what drag artists present on stage among a diverse audience can be achieved through references to universal collective representations that extend beyond the codes and mean-

ings specific to queer culture: “I don’t know to what extent you can identify with a drag queen, with someone’s persona, but I think you can for sure identify with the emotions conveyed in drag” [R10]. Emotional expressions can impact the sense-making process of recipients [Hareli, Hess 2012]; therefore, meanings can be communicated through drag performance by drawing upon emotions and experiences universal for various members of the audience:

When I create a performance, I always try to make it interesting for the viewer to watch, so they can be fully invested and feel the emotion. And even if they don’t fully understand the context, because very often there are personal reflections, or simply the feeling I had when I listened to a song [...], and I developed a vision of how I could convey the emotion I felt to the viewer. And if I do that and succeed, and people actually say it was great and that they simply felt that emotion and experienced it with me, then that’s a success for me. [R21]

Emotions serve a communicative function by fostering connection and mutual understanding. Emotional expressions and exchanges in drag performance are therefore embedded in intersubjectivity – the blending of individual experiences into a shared and co-constructed meaning [Gadamer 1975]. Emotions operate as meaning-centred frameworks for experience. They provide the audience with a way to interpret and adapt to new contexts [Hochschild 1979] by enabling the recognition of the subjectivity of drag performers. When audiences and drag artists share emotional experiences, spectators can develop a feeling of community, which can lead to mutual affection, social cohesion, and a shared sense of purpose [Turner 1974]. By observing the performative act, recipients can identify with the presented experience, often intuitively and unconsciously [Alexander 2010]: “they feel these emotions with me and they experience these emotions, and even if they don’t fully understand it, it doesn’t bore them at all” [R21]. Audience identification with what is enacted on stage signifies a successful projection of meaning. When heteronormative spectators are able to empathise with the social situation of queer individuals, it opens the possibility of initiating social change and reshaping societal imaginaries concerning queer people:

And this activism is absolutely important, because it’s the easiest way to appeal to people through emotions. And nothing evokes emotions like art, [...] Simply put, to change something in some colourful way, to show someone some emotions, you have to appeal to them, to reach them with something. And art is such a medium for communicating certain things. [R4]

Participants recognise the potential for achieving social change through emotions embedded in drag performance, which can reshape the attitudes of heteronormative spectators. Various studies support the idea that emotions have a significant impact on attitude formation [Côté, Hideg 2011; Van Kleef et al. 2011; Van Kleef et al. 2015]. In the event of a potential clash between the

collective background representations and the categorical assumptions of actors and audiences, the script plays a crucial role. From the broad spectrum of meanings, the actor, both consciously and unconsciously, selects the manner in which particular meanings will be presented and the purposes for which they will be projected onto the audience. These choices form the script: an action-oriented set of collective background representations and meanings. To enable cultural extension and psychological identification, the script should appear credible in relation to the background representations and seem truthful to the audience. Both actors and audiences ascribe meaning to the performance not only consciously but also intuitively [Alexander 2006a]. Nevertheless, even when actors carefully craft particular meanings within the narrative of performance, the spectators interpret the performative action independently:

I try to make an emotional connection with these people. Will they be terrified? Will they be angry? Will they be, I don't know, enchanted? I always try to tell a story simply. I mean, I think that's also something important for me: to make it, I don't know, a narrative drag. I mean, it's never like I'm just doing anything on stage. I think there's always a story behind it that I'm trying to tell. It might not always be possible to put it into concrete words, but that's also cool because everyone can see the story they want. That's also for the audience. [R10]

Those narrative choices, along with the emotions conveyed on stage, facilitate the projection of meanings by appealing to the collective imagination: "There's something different in every performance, and I try to tell the story in three acts, three parts. I always try to show the story of some kind of transformation, the transformation of the protagonist, or perhaps even some hurting" [R12]. Storytelling in performance can serve as a space for dialogue with other individuals, communities, and cultures [Stucky, Wimmer 2002]: "I believe that art is precisely this dialogue with oneself; it is a dialogue with others; it is also, let's say, an intermediary for telling stories" [R7]. Miller [1990] emphasizes that while narrative is universal and accessible to a broad audience, it also provides a space for critiquing normative assumptions. Storytelling in drag performance can become a site for experimenting with alternative beliefs and values. Drag artists, by questioning the dominant culture, expose its fragility and vulnerability. Therefore, the performance of narrative drag enables spectators to experience catharsis, which can lead to a transformation of their prior moral evaluations, and the cultural performance may serve as a stimulus for further social action [Alexander 2006b]. The skilful selection of specific meanings projected onto the audience of a drag performance makes it possible to create an impression of authenticity and to foster identification with the emotions conveyed in the performance:

What I love most about drag is that people can, for a few minutes, sometimes hours, sometimes even, it might sound counterintuitive, but you can be authentic without being yourself. And that's a beautiful thing. You create a stage persona that's either completely unlike you or a complete exaggeration of your everyday traits, and thanks to that, you can feel relief, you can allow yourself to comment, to perform, to express emotions that we often have to keep bottled up in our daily lives. It's not appropriate to burst into tears in public when someone is really upset. It's not appropriate, but in drag? [...] You want to do a song where you end up with tears in your eyes and the audience isn't sure if they should cry, if you're really crying, or if it's just acting, but they sympathise with you either way. [R18]

The performance itself takes place in a specific time and space. The *mise en scène* is the confrontation between the script and performative action. The actor enacts symbolically framed social issues, bringing the script and background representations to life for the audience [Alexander 2006a]. The *mise en scène* encompasses the visual aspects of the performance, which play an essential role in drag performances. The atmosphere created by performers during their acts, the spatial setting in which drag shows take place, and how actors animate the script before the spectators all influence the success or failure of the cultural performance. A successful one leads to a sense of solidarity with others through a shared experience of catharsis [Alexander 2013], also mentioned in other studies [Kaminski, Taylor 2008], which note that heterogeneous audiences often experience a sense of community and solidarity during drag performances: “More queer people come that night. So the heteronormative people also see a certain community. Plus, they simply feel the atmosphere in the place; they also say that it completely changed that night, that there was such euphoria, such love, such ease” [R12]. The staging of drag performances determines whether they will be perceived as authentic and persuasive. Effective *mise en scène* requires the coordination of the actor's performance with the script, as well as an appropriate physical environment, props, and costumes [Alexander 2006a]. In this way, the *mise en scène* facilitates audience identification with the meanings presented on stage: “It was like these props, they really help me to immerse people in the story, into the performance. That's an essential element” [R12]. The physical environment – the space and context in which performative action takes place – constitutes one of the key aspects of the *mise en scène* of a cultural performance. As drag gains popularity, it increasingly appears in a broader range of venues, thereby reaching more diverse audiences. A drag performance staged at a queer club event will differ from one presented on a theatre stage, in part precisely because of the *mise en scène*. The staging of drag in spaces oriented toward heterogeneous audiences can make the art form more accessible to newcomers unfamiliar with

drag. Several drag artists who participated in the study emphasised the activist dimension of bringing queer performances beyond the queer community:

We also made this musical, to show that it can have a truly cool, but also professional form. And that's quite accessible to various people who, for example, don't want to go to clubs, but who will go to the theatre and see something like that. And I also think that's a kind of activism, that, like, hey... That's why we also wanted to make a show like this, to create something that could actually be for people who haven't been to such an event. [R7]

SOCIAL POWER AND ACCESS TO THE PRODUCTION OF MEANINGS

Alexander [2006a] emphasises that the process of cultural performance is shaped by the distribution of power within society, as well as by political and economic conditions and prevailing social hierarchies. Social power influences cultural performance on multiple levels; groups that exercise material and interpretive authority will not legitimise every performance. Social power determines who can present cultural performances and with what means of symbolic production, which audiences gain access to those performances, and what kinds of responses are permitted. The success of staging a script depends, *inter alia*, on access to the means of symbolic production, which include the material objects and artifacts that enable actors to project meanings. Such objects serve as iconic representations that help to make visible and dramatise the themes to which performers refer in their acts [Alexander 2006a].

Successful performative action requires control over the means of symbolic production to create space for cultural performance within the collective imagination, as well as access to media such as television, film, newspapers, radio, and the Internet [Alexander 2006b]. It is often through the media that censorship and intimidation are used to restrict the production and distribution of symbolic communication, thereby preventing and controlling political dissent [Alexander 2006a]. In his cultural-sociological theory of materiality, Alexander [2020] describes the role of critics in the interpretive process of meanings carried by material objects. Critics dictate how audiences should view an aesthetic object and how to understand the meaning behind it. Even when artists have access to the means of symbolic production, their work often does not reach a broader audience. Those who control the spaces in which art can be displayed are responsible for providing the staging of the performance and hold structural power over the process of iconisation. The ephemeral nature of some art forms makes artists even more dependent on critics [Alexander 2020]. In Poland, for a long time,

drag was presented in public discourse in a highly negative light [Janion 2020], which significantly shaped the pejorative reception of drag performances among a substantial part of society. However, the interpretation of drag performances by audiences outside the queer community may change once they have the opportunity to witness a drag performance in person: “How we are perceived by society and how our image is created is completely different from coming and proverbially touching something: simply coming to an event, seeing and feeling the energy” [R4]. As has been mentioned at the beginning of this article, drag is gaining visibility in the Polish mainstream media through television and social media platforms. In interviews, participants reflected on the impact of drag’s presence in mainstream media on public awareness:

Because of this show *Drag Me Out*... [laughter] Because literally when it was first broadcast, I was coming back, I was coming back from school on the tram and I literally heard a woman explaining to another woman on the tram what drag is and what it looks like, and I was like, oh my god, it really has such a social impact. [R6]

Alexander [2006a] emphasises that the more complex a given society is, the more difficult access to the means of symbolic production is, such as the spaces in which cultural performance can take place. Access to the stage is directly connected with access to the audience. Several participants in the study indicated that, despite the growing popularity of drag, there remains a persistent problem related to the limited number of venues available for performances: “There are fewer and fewer places to perform; there are more and more artists, and it is very difficult to find a place of your own” [R13]. One person explains the lack of access to space by stating the fact that drag remains an art associated mainly with minority culture, which translates into limited interest in this form of entertainment: “There is a problem with space, because it’s very... Despite everything, there’s not as much demand for drag. There aren’t as many people willing to come to shows and pay for performances, so there are fewer and fewer of these spaces, and they have increasingly stringent conditions” [R1].

Nevertheless, not all drag queens agreed that performance spaces in Poland are becoming increasingly limited. Some emphasised that, due to the growing popularity of drag, new opportunities for performers are emerging: “Before, drag was really only found in gay clubs, but now? Drag appears in shopping malls, in various clubs, not just gay ones, but in very different ones, not just in clubs, but also in pubs and restaurants, so it’s kind of more developed, and there’s more to find and see” [R12]. Drag is emerging in new spaces, allowing performers to

reach a broader audience. Some drag queens possess the resources to organise their own events, thereby also providing opportunities for other artists to perform:

We've managed to create events that are open to everyone, including drag branches where you can bring your kids, and where older people have also come. And well... Wherever I can, I also try to take advantage of the opportunity to introduce drag to a new space. [...] Also, because drag is trendy, corporate events, for example, often come up with the idea that, oh, maybe let's have drag bingo, or even invite drag queens. There have been a few such events, and it's also great that people decide to do something like that because, like I said, you look at most places and say to yourself, 'Oh my, they just need a drag queen' [laughs]. [R4]

Alexander also describes the material aspect of symbolic production: the location of a cultural performance influences the production of meaning. Cultural performances are determined by the space in which they take place [Alexander 2006a]. Analogously, the space in which a drag performance occurs, as well as the character of the event, shapes its form and affects the process by which actors project meanings: "I choose my repertoire for every event, right? I'm at a wedding, so I won't do Rihanna's SM where you whip your partner, because that's not appropriate, right? I don't know, it's the CEO's birthday, so I won't do that either, I won't spill blood all over me, I won't do anything like that" [R16]. Drag performances in queer clubs often differ from those staged in theatres or at private shows and corporate events. As other studies indicate [Balint et al. 2026], drag artists often modify their performance depending on the audience they are engaging with. One of the drag queens participating in the study, while living abroad, had the opportunity to perform in drag at a church. She emphasised this dependency between the space in which one performs and the character of the performance itself:

It was in church, and it was a very pleasant situation, the largest male choir in the city where I lived, [...] If they needed someone to host a drag show in between their concerts or something like that, they were quite willing to contact me because they knew I wouldn't embarrass them, so to speak, Because there are things that are and aren't appropriate in certain places. [R18]

The growing visibility of drag performances in public spaces creates opportunities to challenge and shift social norms related to gender and sexual expression. Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson [2005] stated in their research that drag performances, despite being framed in humour, music, and masquerade, are purposefully staged by artists to challenge normative gender and sexual categories and relations of power. In the study by Egner and Maloney [2016], the authors also highlight the conscious approach of the participants to subverting social norms regarding gender and sexuality, thereby influencing the audience of the performance. The

subversive potential of drag within the broader social context is also frequently emphasised in the statements of participants of this study:

For me, that's what drag really is: a certain need and courage to show off your screaming, colourful expression. And since I have the strength to go out in such a screaming outfit, I have a feeling that, you know, if an average straight person notices me on the street first, and then someone else wearing a weird hat, they won't remember the person with the weird hat at all, right? [...] So I feel like we're somehow breaking the norm by going to extremes, which is great. [R2]

And it definitely has an impact on the community, as we're pushing the middle ground, because it's often the case in politics that many people want to be in the middle. And when that middle ground is pushed because drag is, for people who don't do it or aren't interested in it, it's strange. And when it starts to appear more and more, for example, civil partnerships or name changes for transgender people seem more and more normal. [R6]

Access to the means of symbolic production as performance spaces and media visibility not only enable the subversion of heteronormative norms, but also facilitates the use of drag as a tool to initiate discursive processes and provoke reflection on mechanisms of exclusion: “This performance itself, in my opinion, disenchants the LGBT community, [...] [heteronormative spectators] have to change their worldview a little; they have to start asking questions a little, start finding out what it is, what kind of performance it is, who this person is, and thanks to these questions, they also learn and can open up” [R12]. Drag engages with structures of meaning that, as Reed and Alexander note, are deeply entrenched and sanctioned. Material incentives push individuals toward conformity, while deviations from the norm are met with sanctions [Reed, Alexander, 2009]. Performers in drag are primarily queer individuals belonging to sexual minorities, who often continue to experience various forms of discrimination and prejudice from the heteronormative majority. Balint et al. [2026] stress that drag performance provides a powerful platform for marginalised communities, serving as a tool for advocacy and visibility. The representation of drag in public discourse can stimulate critical reflection on the mechanisms of marginalisation:

[Drag] It's so exaggerated, so it really draws attention. This allows it to be present in society, and obviously, in both negative and positive ways. It sucks when it's negative, but on the other hand, it makes us visible, and we can also talk about it and raise the topic. Why, for example, does someone have a problem with it and discuss the topic publicly. [R9]

PERFORMER AND SPECTATOR

Individuals performing in drag prepare their stage personas through the careful selection of means of symbolic production, such as costumes, makeup, wigs, and props. They often conceptualise their performance in advance to create a script: “This person, who performs, does everything themselves. They plan the show themselves, they perform the performances themselves, they make the costumes themselves, so they’re the director, the costume designer, and so on” [R13]. Access to means of symbolic production, a well-written script, and a skilfully executed *mise en scène* do not necessarily guarantee the success of a performance. The actor faces the challenge of enacting their role in a natural and authentic manner [Alexander 2006a]. Suppose the performer succeeds in bringing the script to life through a convincing staging, and the audience begins to identify with the presented meanings. In that case, the performance may catalyse social change:

I believe that practising art and being an artist means that we don’t change people, we give them the incentive to change. I believe that an artist can’t change anyone, because people change themselves in some way. We simply give them these incentives, more or less explicitly, but sometimes people simply need something to think about. [R7]

Through “troubling” gender, drag performance can provoke audience members to think about what it really means to be a man or a woman [Taylor, Rupp 2006]. Actors in cultural performances attempt to control meanings. They allude to widely understood symbols and metaphors, seeking to construct preferred codes and archetypes within their actions. By controlling the means of symbolic and emotional production, they control the audience’s interpretation [Alexander 2006b]. In the case of successful cultural performance, the performer’s message will be clear and compelling. It is the responsibility of the actors to integrate all elements of the cultural performance so that they appear seamless and invisible. When, in the eyes of the audience, actors break character, perform an impersonal script, or act under insincere motivations with the aim of manipulating the viewers, the projection of meaning of the social situation is likely to fail [Alexander 2006a]. The performer’s agency to provoke broader social change carries the responsibility of presenting the performance authentically:

I believe that creating is also a kind of responsibility because what we create is one thing, but I believe that we need to talk about how we create, [...] I believe that if we actually think professionally and seriously about certain productions or any artistic endeavours, it can also change the way people think and perceive us as artists a little. [R7]

During the in-depth individual interviews, drag performers discussed the strategies they employ to reshape societal perceptions of queer individuals: “My

message is that simple kindness, and sometimes even spiteful kindness, will take you further and show you more. One-on-one, heart-to-heart contact will change more than the most popular hashtag on the internet” [R18]. Dialogue and education through performance are discussed in the studies of Taylor and Rupp [2006], who describe how drag queens consciously use performance to educate heteronormative viewers. Drag shows are spaces where straight people come into contact with queer culture. Participants in this study also emphasised that drag can serve an educational role, challenging audiences’ moral judgments:

It’s difficult; sometimes I lack the patience, but I admire people who can talk openly with this person and answer all their questions with such patience. And that this can somehow make them realise that, in fact, maybe not now, not in a year, but maybe in a few years, for example, they’ll realise that ‘I don’t really know what my problem was,’ right? That people do change in some way. I also know people who were once very homophobic, but they met queer people who completely changed their attitudes. On the one hand, it’s sad that some proof is needed to show that we are human. On the other hand, it’s great that there’s a possibility to do something to change these people’s thinking. [R9]

The participant emphasised that the role of an educator can be challenging and demanding. Nevertheless, drag artists often use their platform to present the social situation of queer people to the public, both through the emotions contained in their performances and through interaction with the audience. The empirical findings from the conducted observations are consistent with the prior research [Taylor, Rupp 2006]. During drag events held at a venue not typically associated with the LGBTQ+ community, which attracts a heterogeneous audience, the artists directly addressed spectators, highlighting the discrimination experienced by members of their community:

As you know, not only in our country, but all over the world, the queer community is also persecuted, stigmatised and treated as savages, so thank you for your open-mindedness. It’s great that there are people like you, and a big round of applause for you. [the audience applauds and cheers] After all, it will still take some time for our art to become mainstream and tolerated everywhere, but this is changing, and I think that those who say we are savages will one day simply say that we are savages, but in a different way [with a smile]. Let’s play! [O2. 08.02.2025]

Drag performances can serve as a space for dialogue and social intervention, confronting audiences beyond the queer community with the social situation of LGBTQ+ individuals. Participants in the study also acknowledged that the reception of drag is more positive when it is presented as an art form: “It also matters very much how you present something to them because sometimes, when you approach it, describing it like a theatre play, they suddenly have a completely different approach, from personal experience, when I’ve talked to people” [R1].

The context and space in which a performative action takes place influence how audiences interpret drag. When a drag performance is perceived as an artistic act, there is a higher chance that the meanings projected onto the audience by the performer will be met with acceptance and understanding. Conversely, when spectators are unaware of a drag artist's intentions, cultural performance loses its impact, and audience identification with the drag performer's action does not occur, and consequently, these actions may be met with negative reactions: "The social acceptance of artistic projects in urban spaces is completely different than for an individual, whom you don't know, whether it is creation or the way they express themselves every day" [R2].

Another important aspect of cultural performance is the relationship between performative projection and audience reception. Spectators are not "innocent"; their worldview, class, gender, and other characteristics influence how they perceive and respond to a performance. One of the primary challenges in integrating the various elements of performance is societal fragmentation. Audiences are segmented, with diverse experiences and backgrounds. This means that cultural extension and psychological identification occur in different ways and at various paces. An audience diverse in terms of worldview, race, background, class, or religion may respond to the same performance in radically different ways. For this reason, cultural performances of an affirmative nature are much easier to carry out than universalising ones. The most challenging task is to stage a successful, integrated cultural performance under conditions of political and ideological polarisation [Alexander 2006a]. Audiences of drag performances, especially those extracultural ones, do not constitute a homogeneous group. They include individuals of different ages, backgrounds, sexual orientations, and worldviews. Drag itself often provokes extreme reactions, ranging from admiration to hostility:

As a marginalised person, you'll perceive differently someone marginalised who suddenly appears on stage and has a power moment, but if straight people who appear in queer spaces accept this and are allies, that's completely fine. Of course, there were situations when the reception wasn't super joyful, when you encounter someone who doesn't quite know where they are. And sometimes, of course, there are comments like "cross-dressers, weirdos, blah, blah, blah." [R2]

In pluralistic social situations, the elements of performance tend to become fragmented. For performative social protest to reach an audience, those elements must be re-fused by evoking emotions and striving for authenticity. Extra-performative aspects such as interpretative, material, and demographic resources also play an essential role [Alexander 2017]. An audience unfamiliar with drag performance possesses fewer interpretative resources. As one of the drag artists

pointed out in their interview, even the art form itself can be overwhelming for a new spectator:

Because when you have someone from outside the community, they have twenty thousand more things to process, right? And for them, for example, the very concept of a drag show is simply cosmic. [...] I wanted to say, yes, conversations with such people are definitely completely different, because they haven't seen anything like this on stage. [...] But often, even people from outside of the community pay attention to what I'm trying to convey, right? Because it's not about it being a drag show. It's simply a form that conveys messages. [R7]

Jeffrey Alexander explains that cultural performances generate unintended interpretations. In the case of social dramas within complex societies, alongside the visible audience to which actors address their performances, there exists an absent audience. The absent audience is likely to interpret the performance in ways that contradict the actors' intentions [Alexander 2006b]: “It's like, sure, we're all having fun, it's colourful, but sometimes drag causes a huge social distance to our, our performance, you know, people are like, ‘umm, ummm, faggots, perverts, idiots’ [mimics] and so on” [O1. 09.11.2024]. Nevertheless, by bringing drag performances into new spaces, actors have the opportunity to expose members of the absent audience to the performative action, which brings potential for new interpretations: “I think heteronormative people can enjoy it. For example, [drag name] recently hosted bingo at a senior centre. I think it's absolutely doable and people can get satisfaction from it, although it probably needs to be the right audience” [R17]. A participant noted that drag performance does require a “right audience”, and consequently does not guarantee a change in every person's attitude towards the queer community. Another drag artist expanded that topic, underlining the difficulty of reshaping the image of the queer community through drag while the audience is severely prejudiced:

I don't see drag helping, for example, someone who holds extremely negative views or simply doesn't accept the LGBT community. I don't think drag would entirely help such a person understand, accept, or more quickly embrace the LGBT community because, like it or not, it's incredibly controversial for heteronormative people, who don't seem to be involved in their daily lives. It's simply breaking the boundaries of what gender is or how one can express oneself. [R21]

CONCLUSION

Participants in this study demonstrated varied approaches to their artistic practice. The diversity of perspectives within the sample allowed for the identification of two types of drag performance: intracultural and extracultural drag performance, with the latter being the focus of this article. Several performers expressed a desire

to reach new audiences, motivated by the activist aim of impacting new spectators with their artistic practice. Artists perceive extracultural drag performance as a conscious tool of social change. It is not only a form of artistic expression, but also a way of demonstrating the social and cultural values of the queer community, as well as a means of emancipation and activist engagement. The aim of those performances is to draw the attention of a broader audience to the social issues faced by non-normative individuals. These actions aim to foster social awareness, initiate discursive processes, and reshape societal perceptions of queer individuals.

In a successful cultural performance, all its elements – script, actor, background culture, *mise en scène*, audience, and means of symbolic production – become indivisible and invisible, and the performative action has the potential to catalyse social action [Alexander 2006a]. The integration of the elements of a cultural performance is achievable, even with a diverse audience. To communicate effectively with heteronormative spectators who may not be familiar with the cultural codes of the queer community, artists often employ universal emotions, experiences, and storytelling techniques. Emotions function as a communicative tool, fostering connection and mutual understanding. Storytelling within performances becomes a space for dialogue and for the critique of normative assumptions. By appealing to universal codes, emotions, and narratives, performers can engage a broader audience and facilitate identification with the presented message. For the viewer to affiliate with the performance, they must relate the emotions, roles, and developments shown on stage to their own personal growth, roles, and emotions. The spectator identifies with something that is not identical to themselves [Alexander 2006a].

Drawing on the presented definition of emancipation as a process of transformation and social change aimed at overcoming oppression and fostering human freedom and agency [Wright 1994; Bhaskar 2009], extracultural drag performances have the potential to contribute to the emancipatory processes of the LGBTQ+ community. By shaping social awareness, drag performances can support the redefinition of social imaginaries concerning queer people. Participants in the study emphasised the potential of extracultural drag performance as a tool for genuine social change: “I’ll tell you honestly, even if you change one person, or one person’s world, it’s still beautiful. [...] It’s also beautiful that you never know what kind of people you’ll meet. I hope there are many people whose worlds I was able to change” [R7]. Drag performance constitutes a potent tool for marginalised communities, enabling advocacy and visibility, creating opportunities to challenge social norms related to gender and sexuality, initiate discursive processes, and provoke reflection on the mechanisms of exclusion.

Even when met with negative reactions, drag performances contribute to the visibility of the queer community and create opportunities for public discussion: “the fact that it’s so motley and [heteronormative audiences] sometimes feel a slight reluctance to it at first, but it’s how you can convince them, show them, and then they are the loudest people shouting for equality, for kindness, for compassion, and that makes me even happier” [R18]. The audience’s interpretation is a process, not an automatic effect of performance. When spectators engage with the performance, it can lift them out of their demographic and subcultural niche into a more universal and broadly shared liminal space [Alexander 2006a]. Identification with the characters allows the audience to connect with meanings that extend beyond themselves and to reflect on the moral implications of the performance. Drag performances can serve an educational purpose, prompting audiences to reflect on and reconsider their perspectives.

Although the study contributes to a better understanding of how drag performers perceive their artistic activity and their impact on various audiences, it also has certain limitations. Future research could engage more explicitly with the experiences and perspectives of spectators of drag performances – to verify the extent to which the participants’ beliefs about social change are justified. Additionally, studies involving more artists who perform in masculine drag are needed, as only two individuals in the sample engage in both feminine drag and drag king performance. Their perspective would enrich existing knowledge and provide a more comprehensive view of drag within the Polish socio-cultural context, particularly since their performances might engage with critiques and the deconstruction of patriarchy, masculinity and heteronormativity in unique ways. Including more drag kings in future research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the diversity of this art form, its activist potential in relation to norms of masculinity, and the specific challenges faced by artists, ultimately broadening knowledge about drag as a tool for social change in Poland.

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Agnieszka Maresch

**“O MATKO, IM BRAKUJE DRAG QUEEN”. ZMIANA SPOŁECZNA
POPRAZEMOCJE I STORYTELLING W ZEWNĄTRZKULTUROWYM
PERFORMANSIE DRAGOWYM**

Streszczenie

W Polsce sztuka dragu zaczyna pojawiać się w nowych przestrzeniach i wchodzić do kultury głównego nurtu. Drag jest nie tylko formą ekspresji artystycznej, lecz może również stanowić medium komunikowania społecznych i kulturowych wartości społeczności queerowej. Może stać się narzędziem emancypacji oraz sposobem na aktywistyczną działalność. Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza zewnątrzkułturowego performansu dragowego w oparciu o teoretyczne ramy makrosocjologicznego modelu działania społecznego jako performansu kulturowego autorstwa Jeffreya Alexandra. Analiza jest oparta na badaniach jakościowych: indywidualnych wywiadach pogłębionych, w których wzięły udział osoby niebinarne, mężczyźni i kobiety występujące na polskiej scenie dragowej. Zewnątrzkułturowy performans dragowy jest kierowany do ludzi spoza środowiska queerowego i ma na celu zwrócenie uwagi na problemy społeczne z jakimi mierzą się osoby nieheteronormatywne. Występy dragowe są postrzegane przez artystów jako narzędzie zmiany społecznej i forma przekazu, za pomocą której mogą komunikować innym znaczenie swojej społecznej sytuacji. Zewnątrzkułturowy performans dragowy służy kształtowaniu świadomości społecznej oraz inicjowaniu procesów dyskursywnych, może przyczynić się do przeformułowania społecznych wyobrażeń dotyczących osób nieheteronormatywnych oraz skłonić do refleksji nad mechanizmami wykluczenia.

Słowa kluczowe: performans drag, drag queen, zmiana społeczna, emocje, storytelling, performans zewnątrzkułturowy