



## RuPaul's Drag Race Keyboard

Affect and Resistance through  
Visual Communication

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App: RuPaul's Drag Race Keyboard

Developer: Snaps Media Inc.; © 2015 Viacom International

Release Date: April 2015 (Current and Final Version: 1.5)

Category: Entertainment

Price: Free

Platforms: iOS/Android

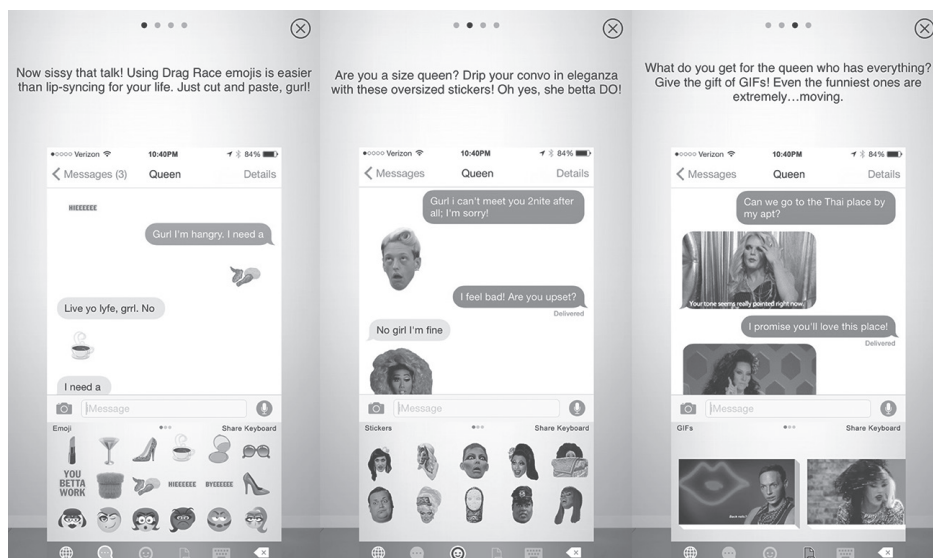
Tags: RuPaul's Drag Race, GIFs, emoji, gender

Tagline: "Now Sissy that Talk!"

Related Apps: Giphy Keys, Jiffmoji, Kimoji, VH1  
Entertainment

"Now sissy that talk! Using Drag Race emojis (*sic*) is easier than lip-synching for your life. Just cut and paste, gurl! Are you a size queen? Drip your convo in eleganza with these oversized stickers. Oh yes, she betta DO!" So began the installation instructions on the RuPaul's Drag Race Keyboard (RPDRK), a mobile application that allowed the user to pepper their text conversations with a series of customized emoji, stickers, and animated GIFs.

*RuPaul's Drag Race* is a competition-based reality TV show on Viacom's Logo network, the self-labeled "gay epicenter of culture" ("About", 2015). Combining elements of *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* pits a cast of drag queens against one another in the quest to win the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar" along with a cash prize of one hundred thousand dollars, a vacation, and a large supply of cosmetics. It is one of the most profitable and highly rated titles for the network (Baron 2015), so when it came time to promote the seventh season, Logo partnered with branded keyboard company Snaps Media to create a custom keyboard app for the show.<sup>1</sup> The free RPDRK app contained a series of custom *emoji*, stickers, and animated GIFs that featured the show's most beloved cast members and memorable moments. Although the app was discontinued in 2017, its initial



Installation instructions for the RuPaul's Drag Race Keyboard

success after its 2015 launch was still notable: the keyboard was downloaded over one million times in its first twenty-four hours, and it became a trending search in Apple's App Store ("Solutions," 2015). As of May 2015, almost seven hundred thousand emoji, stickers, and GIFs had been sent through the app (ibid.). Furthermore, the RPD RK connected with users outside of the show's audience and community: the app's user base is approximately 50 percent women, far exceeding Snaps's demographic expectations given the dominantly male viewership of the show (Austin Bone interview, May 1, 2015). Part of the explanation for the keyboard's success has to do with socio-technical practices. Austin Bone, the executive in charge of the keyboard's development, explained that Snaps Media was simply capitalizing on preexisting behavior. The use of emoji and GIFs in text messaging has become a widespread cultural phenomenon. According to Bone, the keyboard was a way for Logo to "empower" their fans with custom emoji and facilitate the behavior of those who were already sending each other funny GIFs and images of the show's contestants via text message (Austin Bone interview, May 1, 2015).

However, most branded keyboards don't take off in the way that the RPD RK did: the metrics for Snaps's other crown jewel—a branded keyboard for the Comedy Central hit *Broad City*—paled in comparison to the RPD RK. Furthermore, the app resonated so much with its users that they began using

a hashtag, #rupaulsdragracekeyboard, to document their use of the app in situ on Instagram and Twitter. While the app might have originated as a marketing ploy, the RPDRK clearly struck a cultural chord, particularly since at least part of its user base was comprised of women who may not even have been fans of the show itself. This chapter argues that the app's cross-audience appeal can be partially explained by the fact that it was rife with transgressive potential that was uncommon for messaging apps at the time. An examination of the app using visual analysis and the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2016) revealed that in its specific curation and display of *Drag Race* content, the RPDRK both enabled and encouraged the deployment of drag femininity in everyday mobile-based conversation. While the mainstreaming of drag culture occurred long before the app's creation, the ways in which the app was used to subvert hegemonic norms by cisgender heterosexual women in particular offers some insight into why the performances of "reality queens" (Gamson 2013) are so appealing in our contemporary moment, whether on TV or as affective punctuation and communicative proxies in text messaging apps. As a (short-lived) keyboard app, the RPDRK exemplified the idea of "mundane software" (Morris and Elkins, 2015; Morris and Murray, this volume); however, the ways in which the app trafficked in resistant modes of gendered self-representation and communication were anything but mundane.

### Gender Trouble? The Complicated Subversiveness of Drag

Drag and feminism have not always been comfortable bedfellows. Judith Butler noted that a feminist critique of drag centers on the perception that drag is fundamentally misogynist because it is based upon the degradation and ridicule of women (1993, 126–27). The assertion that drag culture (and gay culture more generally) has "a misogyny problem" has experienced a recent resurgence in popular discourse (see Donovan 2017). The crux of the drag-as-misogyny argument is that male-to-female drag is a form of punching down, so to speak; rather than ridiculing the straight men who have harassed them, drag queens send up women instead (Murphy 2014). Similarly, the use of terms like "fishy"—which refers to the purported odor of women's genitalia—to describe queens who are "suspiciously convincing" is offered as evidence that gay men view women as objects of disdain (Tabberer 2017). While it may be true that "a lot of queer men have work to do" in this arena (Lang 2017, para. 5), arguing that drag *as a practice* is misogynist because some gay men or

drag artists are misogynist ignores some of the more complicated, subversive, and potentially liberating forces in play.

In “The Aesthetic of Drag,” Daniel Harris addresses the perception of misogyny in drag performance. Drag, he explains, “involves a ritual descent into the morass of American vulgarity” (1995, 71). Drag dissects and reflects, funhouse mirror-style, the “egregious tastes of the homosexual’s bigoted opponents,” from Moral Majoritarians to mall rats (71). Rather than mistakenly interpreting drag as misogynistic, Harris argues that it is really “complacent heterosexuals in general” who are being taunted (71). The representation of femininity in drag performance does not necessarily reflect a love of womanhood, but a desire to deconstruct the binary categories of gender (Barrett 1995). The assertion that drag is misogynist is partially an assertion that what is being represented on stage as “woman” is, in fact, a valid representation of women. As such, the critique of drag as misogynistic somewhat misses the point; the intent of the drag queen is not to pass as a woman, but to exaggerate the qualities that are associated with women and complicate gender representations (Mann 2011, 795). Drag queens draw on stereotypes of what it means to be feminine, and in doing so, they “highlight, provide commentary on, and often challenge prevailing ideologies” (794).

In fact, it is the appropriations of the drag queen that are the source of her political power; drag is “an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination” (Butler 1993, 137). Drag queens reverse the power dynamic between the marginalized and the mainstream by becoming the source of the “gaze” and subjecting the bigoted heterosexual to the scrutiny that she experienced as a “deviant” (Harris 1995, 72). However, the most radical politics of the drag queen are not necessarily in her outward lampoonery, but her acceptance of herself in the face of a society that despises and rejects her. Aesthetic terms such as “fabulous,” whose repeated usage may seem like effeminate verbal punctuation to outsiders, is “an entirely ideological expression” that signifies full self-acceptance in the face of social bigotry (69). Arguably, it is this politics of resilience that is an entry point for heterosexual cis women when it comes to embracing and performing drag femininity. Perpetual self-negation is at the heart of hegemonic femininity: women are expected to always put others first, diet until they are shadows, sacrifice their careers for the “good” of their families, internalize any “unpleasant” affect (such as anger) so as not to upset others, and so on. To reject these forms of erasure and instead engage in full self-acceptance in the face of unrelenting, unattainable expectations is a deeply political move.

This is not the only way that heterosexual women can deploy drag politics, however. Women, too, are subject to a heterosexual, patriarchal gaze; women, too, are severely constrained by gender binaries. Furthermore, when women (whether straight, gay, or trans) blatantly or aggressively push back against hegemonic expectations, they are often met with violence. However, when cisgender heterosexual women deploy forms or representations of drag femininity, it is usually not seen as subversion or resistance against oppressive gender norms. Thanks to reality TV, the once avant-garde and often risky performances of queens (Newton 1972) have become standard (if not entirely apolitical) fare, and the resulting proliferation of “reality queens” in female-targeted media means that performances of “queeny” femininity by cis straight women can be written off as expressions of fandom or cultural knowledge. While this makes drag a safer route to resistance for women, unfortunately this is not the case for LGBTQ+ individuals for whom any display of non-normative femininity (drag or otherwise) comes with considerable risks outside of LGBTQ+ spaces and places.

### The Rise of “Reality Queens”

Joshua Gamson (2013) notes that despite the violence and ridicule that effeminate boys and men face in the off-television world, they have become fixtures in reality television. He argues that the dominance of queens who “tell you what not to wear and how to decorate your house, judge your taste or exhibit their own, [and] decide if you’re the winner” is thanks to market forces and “the exigencies of television,” rather than broader sociocultural shifts (Gamson 2013, 52–53). The explosion of reality TV in the late 1990s and early 2000s brought new economic exigencies and thus new formats of shows, such as style makeover and fashion-based competition shows, that were welcoming to gays and lesbians (Dovey 1998). The queeny-ness of the reality TV landscape helped lay the groundwork for the introduction of drag into that particular milieu, as did the new era of mass celebrity that accompanied the explosion of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Real Housewives*, and the *Bachelor/ettes* onto the scene. As Harris explains, “Modern drag is rooted in the culture of mass celebrity. . . . It is an eccentric by-product of our increasingly intense involvement with popular entertainment” (1995, 66). What better way to offer a critique of “reality” celebrity than to create a competition show that both literally and figuratively shows the backstage of reality TV? Launched in 2009,

*RuPaul's Drag Race* is part of the broader reality TV trend of “dualcasting” programming to heterosexual women and gay men (Sender 2007) and was central to Logo’s strategy of “gaystreaming” LGBTQ content to straight women as a method for garnering higher ratings (Ng 2013). By taking drag out of the gay bar and putting it on national television, *RuPaul's Drag Race* was accused of producing “a more normalizing view of drag performance and competition” (Edgar 2011, 136). However, while the drag offered by *RuPaul's Drag Race* may not be genderfuck or other more radical forms of the genre, it is hard to argue that the show fails to operate in incendiary ways; after all, the judgment criteria for the queens is their c.u.n.t: charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. As Gamson argues, *RuPaul's Drag Race* “is no assimilationist fare” (2013, 54), and it this undercurrent of mutiny and subversion that was actively deployable—and deployed—in the RuPaul’s Drag Race Keyboard.

### **“F\*ck All You Bitches”: Transgressive Affect in the RuPaul’s Drag Race Keyboard**

The emojis, stickers, and animated GIFs in the RPDRK were, in a word, hilarious. They were also over-the-top, bawdy, grotesque, and snarky. In short, they were everything hegemonic femininity is not, and this was arguably the core of their appeal for the women who used the app. They provided color, both literal and figurative, to a technical environment where emojis, the dominant affective “digital companions” (Stark and Crawford 2014), had only recently added nonwhite skin tones in response to public outcry. Furthermore, the RPDRK offered a broader spectrum of performative options. As Luke Stark and Kate Crawford have argued, traditional emoji are inherently conservative and offer “new opportunities for digital expression, but only if you’re speaking their language” (2014, 1). In this language, even the euphemisms are sanitized: in 2015 Instagram banned the eggplant emoji from appearing in search results because of its phallic associations (Bonnington 2015), and the peach emoji was redesigned in 2016 so that it looked less like a rear end (Dickson 2016). Not so with the RuPaul’s Drag Race Keyboard emoji: despite the fact that there are only seventeen of them, one is, literally, a pink furry box (subtlety be damned). While it may be true that the Unicode emoji have “nothing much to say about our political impasses” (Stark and Crawford 2014, 1), the same cannot be said about those in the RPDRK.

Emoji and other sticker applications on commonly used apps such as Face-



Stickers from the RuPaul's Drag Race Keyboard

book provide a range of “negative” emotions, including sadness, annoyance, fatigue, and frustration, but they do so in a safe and sanitized way. The stickers and GIFs provided by the RPDRK, on the other hand, are downright carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984), subverting dominant culture through humor and chaos and invoking the rage of the subordinated. In his explanation of the shift in drag culture in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots, Harris describes how the default facial expression of the drag queen became the “ferocious baring of the fangs” characteristic of the “drag screech” (1995, 69). The drag screech is on full display in the RPDRK, along with a host of other outlandish facial expressions and exaggerated missteps. These blatant failures of femininity are not held up as moralistic warning signs, but instead as the gleeful embrace and embodiment of, as the queens would say, the hot mess. The femininity on display here is the opposite of the “cool girl,” all good times and sangfroid; instead, it shows what femininity could be if (and arguably is when) it fully lets go: hungry, desirous, playful, funny, angry, bitchy, messy, fabulous. The difference between standard emoji and the options available on the RPDRK is something that users have commented on; as one Instagram user gushed, “#rupaulsdragracekeyboard has made my life so much easier . . . your queens deliver your mood better than any emoji.” In another post, the same woman

simply posted a large photo of one of the drag screech stickers with no comment, much to the appreciation of her Instagram followers.

### **“I Can Speak Drag!” Subtle Subversion on #rupaulsdragracekeyboard**

The hashtag #rupaulsdragracekeyboard is used on Instagram and Twitter, where users—most of whom identify as female—document the conversations they have on the keyboard and the different ways they can, in the words of one user, “speak drag.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, these conversations are not exactly prim and proper. One example includes a conversation between two girls discussing a carrot in an explicitly sexual way. “Lmao don’t stick it in,” says the first; “I won’t haha I’m eating it,” says the other, only to be met with a GIF of a drag queen throwing some considerable shade. Another young woman shared how she used the GIFs of Bianca Del Rio (the season 6 winner) and Michelle Visage (one of the judges) to reject an unworthy suitor. “Used the new @rupaulsdragrace keyboard today to turn down an annoying boy,” she commented. “@michellevisage and @thebiancadelrio thanks for the help lol.” Her friend responded “OMG THIS IS PERFECT,” and the young woman concurred: “It’s literally the best way to reject a guy without coming out and saying ‘ew no.’ LOVE IT! You should download it and bask in it’s [sic] wonderfulness!”

While not all of the posts on #rupaulsdragracekeyboard blatantly referenced masturbation with vegetables or the gleeful rejection of men, most of them demonstrated that the specific content of the app offered its users the opportunity to express themselves in a unique and engaging manner. One woman posted several times on the hashtag; each post was a picture of her and her friend exchanging over-the-top *Drag Race* GIFs with no text. Each of these posts had the comment “Thank god for the #rupaulsdragracekeyboard” followed by the hashtag “#expressyourself.” Another woman posted a picture of a friend responding to her new hair color with the comment “Oewh fancy!!” followed by a GIF of a drag queen tossing her hair in a glam, defiant way. The caption read, “when you get new hurr and your best friend gets a new iPhone.” The playfulness of these and other posts on the hashtag reflect the gratification of engaging on one’s own terms—a pleasure that is frequently denied to even the most powerful women. This is, perhaps, what the RPDRK afforded on a micro level for its cis, straight, female users: the ability to express



one's fabulousness regardless of size, shape, or color and a means of celebrating affect that society deems impolite, unladylike, and inappropriate. The posts on the hashtag are only a few of the hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of interactions that took place on the app over its lifespan, but the fact that they were publicly documented indicate that they were meaningful to their users on some level. These posts also underline that the affective affordances of the RPDRK clearly served an unfulfilled need in the technological landscape where it thrived.

### **“Making it work against society”: Concluding Thoughts**

The fact that the RPDRK was removed from the iTunes store and Google Play at some point in 2016 or 2017 probably says more about the economic priorities of Viacom's marketing department than it does about the app itself; in all likelihood, Viacom didn't want to pay to keep the app compatible with perpetually updated operating systems. Or perhaps they realized that they didn't *need* to pay: since the last version of the app was integrated with massive GIF search engine Giphy, the app's previously exclusive content was now easily searchable and available on Giphy's own mobile app. As of September 2017, a search of “RuPaul's Drag Race” on Giphy returned almost twenty-three thousand GIFs; it seems that the show's fans are fully “empowered” without a proprietary keyboard, and the queens continue to live on in conversations across the globe.

However, the initial success of the keyboard and the use of the queens as affective proxies by cis straight women also raises some slightly different political questions than those of the resistance discussed in this chapter. In a 2017 article for *Teen Vogue*, English literature scholar Lauren Michele Jackson argued that when black people become the go-to choice for nonblack users to engage in affective hyperbole in online environments, it operates as a form of “digital blackface.” She explains:

These GIFs often enact fantasies of black women as “sassy” and extravagant, allowing nonblack users to harness and inhabit these images as an extension of themselves. . . . We are your sass, your nonchalance, your fury, your delight, your annoyance, your happy dance, your diva, your shade, your “yaas” moments. (para.

12)

Jackson's argument raises several questions about the politics of *Drag Race* GIF usage. To start, the relationship between gay culture, drag culture, and black culture is complicated. While some have argued that the presence of phrases like "shade," "truth tea," and "yaaaas" is a co-option of black womanhood (see Mannie 2014), others argue that the presence of black vernacular in contemporary gay and drag cultures connects back to the drag balls of the 1980s, and that the use of these phrases reflects the "mimicking of gay men from another era, who found a way to forge an identity amid difficult circumstances" (D'Addario 2014, para. 4). This debate notwithstanding, Jackson's argument raises another question as to whether or not the cisgender heterosexual women using *Drag Race* GIFs are engaging in a type of "digital dragface," so to speak. What does it mean that individuals from a comparatively privileged identity category are using representations of a marginalized group to perform specific kinds of affect and emotion that they might not otherwise feel comfortable expressing? Furthermore, many of the most popular *Drag Race* GIFs have queens of color in them; of course, part of this is because the show's cast is quite diverse and RuPaul herself is black. Nevertheless, the racial identity of the queens certainly complicates the issue—there very well may be multiple types of transgression going on here, and not all of them in service of subverting the patriarchy. There aren't any simple answers to these questions; as always, representations are fraught with intersectional considerations and tensions. Nevertheless, Jackson's argument certainly highlights how purportedly mundane media such as GIFs and GIF keyboards are in fact deeply political and operate at the crossroads of identity and power.

In his behind-the-scenes look at the reunion for *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 2, Rich Juzwiak commented that "making it work against society, drab backgrounds and oneself . . . is what being a drag queen is all about. These are the flowers fighting through the asphalt of our culture" (2010, para. 52). It is likely this spirit that is so appealing and inspiring to the women who choose to represent themselves and their emotions with images and GIFs of the *Drag Race* queens. Complicated and fraught though it may be, the RPDRK (and the GIFs that sustain its legacy) allows users across a spectrum of genders and sexualities to extend a metaphorical middle finger to the patriarchy and, as if instructed by RuPaul, sashay away.

## Notes

1. A keyboard app allows mobile phone users to insert a variety of image formats into text message conversations. It installs itself in the messaging software of a mobile device operating system and is accessible as a keyboard within the text messaging software. Popular keyboard apps include Bitmoji and Tenor.



## DraftKings

Daily Fantasy Sports Leagues,  
Legality, and Shifting Mobile Spaces

JASON LOPEZ

App: DraftKings

Developer: DraftKings LLC

Release Date: December 2013 (Current Version: 3.12.0)

Category: Sports

Price: Free

Platforms: iOS, Android

Tags: fantasy sports, gambling, games

Tagline: “The Game Inside the Game”

Related Apps: FanDuel

The daily fantasy sports company DraftKings seemed to be everywhere in 2015. The business offers a website and an app that allows users to participate in one form of the popular trend of fantasy sports play, the “daily fantasy game” or “daily fantasy play”—an accelerated gaming mode where participants construct their own teams of real athletes and compete with one another by accruing points based on their team’s actual sporting performances over different increments of time during a season (e.g., day, weekend, evening). After spending millions of dollars on advertising and garnering near-ubiquitous visibility on television, DraftKings also made news headlines in October 2015 when the company was sued for negligence, fraud, and false advertising. Rather than simply a popular mode of entertainment, some legislators conceived of daily fantasy sports as a form of problematic gambling that involved finan-