Intersectionality in the Experience of Select Filipino Drag Queens during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article looks into the lived experience of three Filipino drag queens during the COVID-19 pandemic using intersectionality as a lens. Specifically, the study describes their drag engagements before and during the COVID-19 pandemic—how it affected their activity spaces, and how the challenges they experienced intersect to engender a unique experience of marginalization. The study also probes the unearthed potentials of drag as a transfigurative practice, procuring a nuanced understanding of the social reality of select Filipino drag queens by examining the interplay of their two identities (i.e., lived identity and transfigured identity). Research methods include semi-structured interviews. Findings show that a Filipino drag queen's duplex identity entails both expansive and constrictive effect on the activity spaces where these identities are performed. The drag queens' transfiguration into their drag persona also carries a transformative potential, provides them protective functions to some degree, and offers them access to parallel social structures that similarly provide protection and support.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, drag queens, gender expression, intersectionality, activity spaces, social identity*

Introduction

"When we're on stage, and it's time to perform, it's a completely different space. We feel so energized. The aging process stops and the world stops turning for a moment," says Ramon Busa, also known as "Monique Dela Rue"—an elderly drag queen from Home for the Golden Gays, Inc. Drag performance allows drag queens entry to a new world—their own activity space, such as online drag shows, gay bars, pride marches, parades, or pageants. It also provides the opportunity to provide for their families. As Reyes (2017) sums it up, "Drag is a living. It puts food on the table." This study particularly acknowledges how, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the country, drag queens found themselves as "entertainers without their own stage on which to perform, socialites without a bar to call their own—queens without a palace" (Barnett & Johnson, 2012, p. 52).

The marginal status of Filipino drag queens who perform drag for a living, as determined by their nonconformist gender expression and socioeconomic class, overlap and engender intersectional disempowerment, a unique experience of marginalization. Such disempowerment may be examined using what Kimberlé Crenshaw calls "intersectionality."

Intersectionality is a term conceptualized and introduced by Crenshaw, a pioneering scholar on Black feminist legal theory, civil rights, law, and racism. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) employs intersectionality as an analytical tool to account for the " intersecting axes of oppression" when examining the unique experiences of marginalization of Black women (Ceperiano et al., 2016, p.10). She asserts that the marginalized identities of Black women, specifically their social identities of being " a woman" and " of color," overlap and engender "intersectional disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Such intersectional disempowerment is characterized by the "interlocking [of] systems of oppression… [which thereby] form a matrix of domination that structures power and inequality" (Ceperiano et al., 2016). The challenges born out of intersectional disempowerment then coalesce to give rise to a unique experience of marginalization. Crenshaw asserts, however, that such marginalization is more than an aggregate of experiences brought about by sexism and racism. That is to say, the way that both forms of discrimination are experienced "cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (Crenshaw, 1991).

Crenshaw (1989) points out that legislators often employ "single-axis frameworks" in creating anti-discrimination policies, allowing for such policies to exclude Black women and serve only Black men or White women (p. 139-140). In her landmark publication, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991), she problematizes contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses, arguing that identity politics fails to recognize "intragroup differences." Making a Black woman's marginalized identities an "either/or" proposition "relegates the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (p. 1242). The employment of intersectionality as an analytical framework then has the liberatory objective of not only exposing the intersectional issues that marginalized groups face but also denouncing the exclusionary nature of the frameworks used to analyze them—laying down the pathways for empowerment in challenging various forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, etc.)

Beyond Black feminist discourse, Crenshaw's departure from using single-axis frameworks in analyzing experiences of marginalization has reshaped discourse on the issues faced by marginalized groups globally.

This study examines the drag queens' experiences before and during the COVID-19 pandemic—how it affected their activity space and gender expression, and how the challenges they experience, borne by the intersection of their age, class, and gender compound to engender a unique experience of marginalization. Particularly it asks:

1. What is the unearthed potential of drag as a transfigurative practice?
2. How is the intersectional experience constructed when it is uniquely borne by the duplex identity of Filipino drag queens?
3. How did these manifest in their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Essentially, we argue that the impracticability of dichotomizing social categorizations, in highlighting the compounded discrimination experienced by Filipino drag queens, is attributed to the novelty of their intersectional experience. While intersectionality is often employed across lived experiences in which the subject assumes one compounded identity—akin to how intersectionality is adopted to expose "perspectives of both privilege and victimhood" between Black and White women—the intersectional experiences of Filipino drag queens differ in that they teeter between

two identities (Carbado, 2013, p. 306). A Filipino drag queen assumes both her lived identity and her drag persona, and traverses between the lived realities of both as she commits to the repetitious and ritualistic practice of drag. She regularly undergoes a transfigurative process, one that enables an ephemeral transformation of her gender identity, gender role, and gender expression, and is often thereafter perceived and addressed as female as warranted by the drag rhetoric, whether within or beyond the bounds of the spaces for drag performances.

We then argue that drag as a transfigurative practice holds transformative potential not just during drag performance but also in material reality; more than the transformation of her gender, the art of drag transforms her social status—her extravagance, eccentricity, and glamor allowing for her to step into the world of the micro-celebrity. The transfigured identity and celebrified status embodied and maintained by the Filipino drag queen lend her a degree of social protection from the discrimination she often faces, as they allow her to access both people and resources she would not otherwise have access to should she not have embodied her drag persona.

We also argue, however, that the protective functions of drag are not felt nor sustained to the same degree among drag queens. The protective functions of drag are the most potent when amid the following conditions:

First, the qualities espoused by the drag queen's lived and transfigured identities expand the activity spaces she traverses. This condition constitutes the Filipino drag queen's access to capital that would enable her to attain a higher aesthetic value of her transfigured identity (i.e., drag persona), such that it grants her greater access to necessary capital, and eventually allow for greater performance variability. With greater performance variability, her conduit for personal and artistic expression expands, broadening her performance landscape to more enabling, professional environments or activity spaces. This is often practicable in spaces of employment, residence, or recreation in physical communities.

Second, the activity spaces navigated by the Filipino drag queen expand her degree of transfiguration, and transform her reality and living conditions—even as her lived identity. This condition means that the Filipino drag queen has the means to access digital spaces, as they bestow liberties to unbridled public expression. Such liberties allow for performance variability which sequentially allows for greater conformity to drag trends, greater marketability, greater potential for celebrification, increased social and financial capital, and a higher aesthetic value of transfigurative practice. A higher aesthetic value of transfigurative practice then keeps her socially protected. Such condition is often practicable in virtual communities.

Should either of the conditions be unsatisfied, the protective functions of drag are thwarted by exclusionary factors that can lower a drag queen's prospects for success—that is, strained relationships with superiors who determine potentials for status mobility in physical communities, or lack of social and financial capital needed to thrive in virtual communities. We then argue that there appears to be a dialectical relationship between the duplex identity of a Filipino drag queen and her activity spaces.

Lastly, we argue that the transformative potential of drag and its protective functions have allowed for drag queens to find protection in drag houses, which serve as families parallel to their biological families—who often offer conditional support, if they are not completely intolerant or

unaccepting of their SOGIE. A drag queen's parallel family (i.e., drag house), can serve protective functions during times of crisis and had proven to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their parallel social structures also offered them ways to buffer their financial concerns through informal systems of money-lending within the community, collective efforts to assist their sisters who lack technological affordances to thrive on online platforms—such as the members of the Home for the Golden Gays, support for those who were locked down in unsupportive households, as well as aid to their sisters who were reportedly underserved by their local government units during the brunt of the economic crisis.

Review of Related Literature

Within and beyond the bounds of the spaces for drag performances, the drag rhetoric convinces the audience to perceive and address the performers as female. In turn, the term "drag queen" has been used interchangeably with *female impersonator*, and "drag" with *gender impersonation* (Nixon, 2009). Physically, drag queens create the illusion of having female anatomy. This is done through chest contouring, silicone breast forms, hip pads, butt pads, and tucking—where they are "push[ing] their testicles up into the inguinal canal, [and pushing] their penis back between their legs," and secure their genitals in place using duct tape or athletic tape (Nixon, 2009, p. 8). Drag queens paint their faces with makeup looks that exaggerate the arch of their brows, eyelashes, lips, and other facial features in varying degrees.

But drag goes beyond impersonation. Depending on their stylistic preferences, some drag queens maintain the illusion, while some "announce from the start that they are gay men, they talk in men's voices, they make jokes about their large clitorises and 'manginas' and complain that they are having 'testical difficulties' when the music does not work" (Taylor & Rupp, 2006, p. 13). Drag queens shatter the linkages with which society ties biological sexes and social genders together (Nixon, 2009). "Drag shows illuminate gay life for mainstream audiences and provide a space for the construction of collective identities that confront and rework gender and sexual boundaries" (Taylor et al., 2005, p. 105). Drag shows demonstrate how easy it is to parody "the performativity of gender and the slipperiness of sexual desire" (Taylor & Rupp, 2006, p. 13). In the collective participation of its constituents in interrogating the rigid concepts associated with gender, drag—as a queer space—is seen as a space for power and empowerment.

Furthermore, "Precisely because drag shows are entertaining, they attract people who might never otherwise be exposed to gay politics [...] Because the shows arouse visceral emotions, even sexual desires that fall outside people's usual sexual identities, they have the potential to make a real impact" (Taylor & Rupp, 2006, pp. 16-17). Snatch Game, for instance, is a segment in RuPaul's Drag Race, where the contestants impersonate celebrities and other figures in popular culture humorously. Andrews (2020) found that Snatch Game is arguably perfectly positioned to allow queens "to demonstrate glamour and comedy simultaneously: glamour purloined from the impersonated celebrity, and humor in the impersonation itself" (p. 418). These portrayals are similar to the concept of caricature—where both familiarity and exaggeration are used for the purpose of entertainment.

Caricature overlaps with camp in its predilection for hyperbole and distortions to criticize the status quo through humor. A caricature, like camp, is a "lie that tells the truth" (Core, 1999, as cited in Andrews, 2020, p. 418). Caricature capitalizes on comedy's ability to temporarily demonstrate

the superiority of the vulnerable over the elite by using distortions to humiliate and figuratively strip its "subject of power" (Stott, 2005, as cited in Andrews, 2020, p. 421). It is a subversive form in this sense. When the critical eye of caricature is directed at subjects lacking in social or political authority, particularly underprivileged groups or disempowered individuals, this effect is nullified. The production of celebrity, then, can be regarded as a repeated display of recognizable, unique pictures and features. That is to say, the celebrity caricature is known to be a reduced set of traits rather than a whole person to echo the status of celebrities in popular culture. Drag queens' ability to imitate, exploit, and subvert these characteristics through performative caricature opens an interpretation of Snatch Game performances, and other caricatures performed by drag queens, as "queerings of celebrity identity" (Andrews, 2020, p. 427). Thus, Andrews (2020) posits that "drag celebrity impersonation is a queer caricature since drag and camp are queer parodies of gender relations under heterosexist patriarchy" (p. 427).

Jean Baudrillard's (1981/1994) concept of simulation furthermore suggests that "people come to live in pure simulations, replications of reality that resemble it in all respects." That is to say, "real" processes have evolved to be like products that can be simulated through referential cues or symbols where patterns consequentially occur regardless of the intrinsic reality of the staged circumstance. Similar to how camp and caricature are characterized as a "lie that tells the truth," drag queens serve as simulations, or simulacra of what is "real" about gender and social status.

Baudrillard likens the concept of simulation to feigning illness, where the subject performing the simulation eventually develops the symptoms of the illness in the process. In a similar way, when one simulates or stages a crime, the subject will "stay close to the 'truth,' so as to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulation." However, "the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements. [...] In brief, you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real, one of whose functions is to devour every attempt at simulation and reduce everything to some reality: that's exactly how the established order is, well before institutions and justice come into play." The article then argues that when drag queens embody, perform, or "simulate" celebrity, they reportedly access a celebrity-like status during the process.

The transfigurative practice of drag queens goes beyond the transformation of their gender presentation—it also entails the ephemeral transformation of their social status. By social status, we mean how individuals are revered in in-group and out-group settings, marked by their complementary interactions (Rege, 2006). Complementary interactions in broader and more varied social circles, especially when these reach the domains of the celebrity in the mainstream, then, imply greater access to social capital. This phenomenon is called "celebrification" (Feldman, 2020). While "the audience knows that what they see on stage are not really designer clothes or genuine diamond rings, that the elaborate updos are wigs and that the fingernails are press-ons," says Horowitz (2012), drag queens' performance of celebrity qualities and opulence, either by inspiration or impersonation, can ephemerally transform their social status.

The "reiterative performativity" (p. 124) of drag queens' transfigurative practice embodies ritualistic qualities (Jensen & Hapal, 2022). Rituals are completed across a trilateral process composed of "separation," "liminality," and "reintegration" (Van Gepp, 1960). Drag, as a performative practice in both sociological and theatrical senses, hauls its audience into a liminal performance space, compelling them to undergo a "suspension of disbelief, " such that they, whether willingly or unwillingly, perceive and address drag queens as their transfigured identity (Coleridge, 1817, as

cited in Tomko, 2007).

On one hand, Bourdieu (1984) posits that both cultural and economic capital is what constitutes *class*. It has two-dimensional aspects: the vertical and horizontal. The first dimension is determined by the sum of the drag queen's levels of economic and cultural capital. Hence, an individual's social position within the stratification system (i.e., social class) is directly correlated with their capital volume (i.e., a drag queen's number of followers, bookings, gigs, and amount of costume and makeup investments she has gained) (Bourdieu, 1984). On the other hand, Gans (1973) states that moral principles and aesthetic standards influence people's decisions. Rarely do choices happen just because of happenstance. Due to individual's different values and aesthetic standards, and consequently tastes and lifestyle choices, each has its own distinctive art, music, poetry, food, and so forth. Gans (1973) calls these groups of people "taste publics." All these groups of values and aesthetic standards—what Gans (1973) calls "taste cultures"—bring people together and constitute a group of people who make similar choices for similar reasons. Additionally, Bourdieu develops a similar concept to "taste cultures" and "taste publics." He developed a theoretical understanding of how different tastes and lifestyles emerge among various groups of people in his work on how social class interacts with habitus. *Habitus* is defined as "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 86). Cultural practices, in Bourdieu's view, reveal people's diverse preferences and lifestyles as well as the underlying class divisions (Swartz, 1997, as cited in Yuksek, 2016). This perspective focuses on Bourdieu's view of social class and *habitus* in his explanation of how people constitute different groupings and generate diverse practices, bringing forth his main goal, which is to demonstrate how culture and social structure correlate. For drag queens, this scale or spectrum of culture from highbrow, middlebrow, to lowbrow, is available for their disposal at any time. However, not all queens have access to the same capital volume to utilize in their drag careers or personas. Some queens only use capital (cultural or economic) that is necessary for their respective activity spaces (e.g., bars or fiestas).

Key Concepts

Drag as a Transfigurative Practice. Drag is a transfigurative practice that involves drag queens' embodiment of a new identity, i.e., their drag persona, through the use of the fashioned body; that is, the use of aesthetic apparatuses such as wigs, gowns, bodysuits, and shapewear. Drag queens use these apparatuses to "replicate" and "repeat" qualities society has associated with femininity to assume a female persona.

Duplex Identity. The interplay of the drag queens' duplex identity comprises their lived identity non-drag persona. A drag queen's lived identity is the distinct character or personality of a drag queen in their daily lives, outside their drag identity. Meanwhile, their drag persona is an identity created by the drag queen—who the drag queen becomes after she transfigures. Drag personas vary as they are typically influenced by single or multiple celebrities, or by their personal experiences (B. Barretto, personal communication, May 26, 2022). Filipino drag queens assume these two identities, identifying with the contexts and lived experiences of both. The term "transfigured identity" is used interchangeably with drag persona in the study.

Activity Spaces. Activity spaces constitute the "locations and spaces an individual interacts with as a result of their activities" (Gesler & Albert, 2000). While Smith et al. (2019) employ the

concept of activity spaces in that it is "organized around key anchor points" such as home and work locations and recreational spaces—all of which are limited geospatial considerations—we extend the concept of activity spaces from physical communities to virtual communities (i.e., the digital landscape). Both communities are circumscribed by discernible boundaries, in that physical communities are restricted by lines of demarcation and virtual communities are restricted by algorithms and echo chambers. Such circumscriptions shape a drag queen's subject position or "vantage point" to understanding, addressing, and influencing social reality (Torronen, 2001). That is, the physical or virtual communities navigated by a drag queen directly influence their experiences, opportunities, and access to various forms of capital.

Methodology

The study privileges the narratives of Rebel Heart, Lady Gagita, and Odessa Jones— Filipino drag queens who identify as gay, and who had been involved in the local drag scene prior to the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to construct their narratives, from which situated knowledge on their experience of marginalization can be drawn. The narratives were bolstered by input from key informant interviews with industry and academic sources: Ramon Busa, the current president of the Home for the Golden Gays, Inc., and Brain Barretto, the Safe Spaces Coordinator and SOGIE Specialist of the Ateneo de Manila University Gender Hub.
The participants were encouraged to opt for aliases or pseudonyms, and were allowed to withhold any other identifying details to protect their privacy and dignity. Due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic, data collection was done remotely. Access to recordings of communication with all research participants was restricted to the researchers, and the contents were treated with utmost confidentiality.

In examining intersectionality in the experiences of Filipino drag queens, the study gives primacy to the research subjects' interpretations of their own experiences. Specifically, it employs feminist objectivity, or what feminist scholar Donna Haraway propounds as situated knowledge. Situated knowledge is knowledge that is shaped by the cultural and historical context of its epistemic agent. It abides in a "doctrine of embodied objectivity," in that it argues that only subjugated standpoints can promise an "adequate, sustained, objective, [and] transforming account of the world"—in this case, the subjugated standpoint of a Filipino drag queen (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Their narratives, whether of common or unique quality, were then categorized into themes of analysis that constitute the findings of the study.

Meet the Queens

This section will briefly narrate the accounts of the three drag queens who were interviewed, each of whom identified as bakla. The first segment opens with Rebel Heart, a budding drag queen during the pandemic, followed by Lady Gagita, a 28-year-old veteran drag queen. The section ends with Odessa Jones, an older veteran drag queen. All three drag queens prefer using the pronouns she/her for their drag personas. Meanwhile, Rebel Heart prefers using they/them for her lived identity, Lady Gagita prefers using he/him for her lived identity, and Odessa Jones does not have any specific pronoun preference for her lived identity.

All three drag queens expressed similar delight and passion for performing in front of live audiences before the pandemic. Each one's activity spaces may have differed from the others, but

they all actively participated in and enjoyed a robust and lively local drag scene. When the pandemic started, we unraveled stark differences in their experiences. While all had continued to pursue drag as their source of livelihood, Rebel Heart and Odessa Jones did not experience the same financial stability as Lady Gagita, due to factors such as their social location and accumulation of capital. Both Lady Gagita and Rebel Heart would undergo aesthetic transfigurations that were oriented towards the current drag trends, which only served to diversify and maintain their celebrification and performance variability. Meanwhile, due to her lack of technological affordances and activity spaces, Odessa Jones did not have the same access to the social and financial capital other drag queens such as Rebel Heart and Lady Gagita have.

Rebel Heart. Rebel Heart's interest in the art of drag was piqued through the art of makeup in the year 2014. Upon accidentally sculpting her face with black contour makeup, Rebel was told that she resembled a drag queen, which prompted her to take a deep dive into the internet where she first came across RuPaul's Drag Race. She had since then pursued her journey as a drag queen through makeup looks, song covers, and bar auditions and performances. *"Isa rin akong aktibista,"* Rebel proudly declares. *"Hindi lang kami maganda, matalino rin kami, at alam namin ang karapatan ng bawat isa."* Rebel claims that the confidence that she gains from her drag persona is what empowers her to be at the forefront in the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights. Her political participation is grounded on a deep understanding of the drag queen community's long history of resistance and collective struggle since the birth of the gay liberation movement.

Outside drag, Rebel carries the responsibility of being the breadwinner, as they are the only child in the family. And while Rebel considers drag to be more of an avenue of self-expression rather than a career, the imperative to support their family's needs can oblige them to make sure that drag remains a lucrative endeavor. *"Bakla ka na nga, maliit pa kita mo? Pa'no ba yan?* Keep up!" Rebel mimics intolerant "baby boomers." The gradual acceptance of drag as an indispensable part of their lives has also allowed for her family to be more acquainted with drag as a performance art.

During a rocky time in Rebel's life, disputes with veteran drag queens in Nectar Nightclub cost them bookings, and they had to resort to other income sources like a sari-sari store and a small fish ball vending business. The first wave of COVID-19 cases was especially difficult for Rebel due to the complete shutdown of bars and clubs, forcing Rebel to once again return to their other income streams, going as far as selling their drag costumes. They eventually found themselves back in the drag industry, putting on online drag shows on various social media platforms, where earning a total of PhP1,500 every day was considered lucky. This did, however, expand her audience to international viewers. While such online shows were available, drag queens like Rebel Heart still did not see online shows as a satisfactory alternative relative to in-house shows. "*Hindi pa rin* back to normal for me," Rebel Heart explains. Even though drag household names are being booked for physical shows, there is still something missing when other drag queens are not surrounding them for performances and events.

"For me, *'yung pangarap ko lang is matanggap ang* LGBTQIA+ community dito sa Philippines." For many drag queens like Rebel Heart, the drag scene in the Philippines continues to be an avenue for wider acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community. As such, they continue to hope for a more prominent, known, and well-loved drag scene that is able to entertain and enliven its audience, from whom they receive love, acceptance, and solidarity.

Lady Gagita. Outside of drag, there is Vinzon. "The toned-down version of Lady Gagita," Vinzon is, as Gagita describes, no less than "the man behind Lady Gagita," in the sense that he edits and produces her content, as well as designs and crafts her costumes.

To successfully perform drag, however, Lady Gagita must temporarily abandon Vinzon. *"Kasi kung nasa* Vinzon *pa rin akong katauhan, may takot, mayroong* intimidation." Vinzon carries the weight of his responsibilities outside drag; and therefore, he likewise carries the weight of his fears, worries, and inhibitions. To fly as high as she can, Lady Gagita must be weightless—free. This is perhaps why the art of drag feels so cathartic for drag queens like Lady Gagita.

Lady Gagita claims to lend her confidence to Vinzon when he needs it. When she enters a room full of big names as Vinzon—sans makeup, hair, and costume—for instance, she feels as if her confidence is at her lowest. However, once she undergoes the full drag transformation, she finds that it empowers her to even initiate conversations, and command the room. The confidence, however, comes to her only when she is in full drag. *"Kapag feeling ko may kulang sa akin, hindi niya nabibigay yung 100%* personality *na meron ako."* For instance, if she lacks so much as a hip pad, she feels she lacks the power and confidence to face a crowd. For her to fully feel confident, she says, "It has to be perfect."

The biggest similarity between Lady Gagita and Vinzon is their indiscriminate attitude to any opportunity that comes their way. She finds that no stage is too big or too small, and reminds herself to always keep her feet on the ground—keeping in mind her responsibilities outside the stage makes this ultimately possible.

Both in and out of drag, Lady Gagita and Vinzon are both breadwinners. She finds herself providing for two households; her home in Davao and her home in Manila, where she resides with her long-time partner. When she was only starting her drag career, "*Naiimbyerna sila sa'kin kasi siyempre* I'm the eldest in the family, *wala masyadong bakla sa pamilya.*" However, once she started gaining recognition as Lady Gagita, her family let her be, as her drag career became increasingly lucrative.

In February 2020, Lady Gagita was introduced as one of the newest Shopee Live Streamers. Due to the serendipitous timing of this live-streaming gig, Lady Gagita had no need to look for other sources of income at the dawn of the lockdowns. While the COVID-19 cases were steadily increasing, so was Lady Gagita's platform and following. Stuck at home, Lady Gagita pushed her creative capacities, such that she became proficient in editing and producing. A year into the pandemic, Gagita's career experienced substantial growth, as multifarious parties contacted her upon the resumption of physical events. Two years into the pandemic, Lady Gagita returned to physical performances, supplemented with her technical skills enhanced during the first months of the pandemic.

Still, "*Nakakatuwa na nagbago na* treatment *ng* drag queens after *ng* pandemic." Gagita admits that drag was given a spotlight of its own, such that more people realized its significance. *"Naturuan yung mga tao na ganito dapat i-treat yung mga* drag queens. *Parang* it's the same art like k*ung ano yung mga* mainstream media." Concomitant with drag's perceptibility was the increase in baby drag queens, a development which deeply heartens Lady Gagita. "*Nung* pandemic, *tinuruan 'yung mga bakla ng mga bagong bagay. 'Yung 'di nila nagagawa* pre-pandemic *nagagawa nila nung*

pandemic," Lady Gagita explains, emphasizing the pandemic's positive impact on drag and the drag community.

Odessa Jones. "Well, *sa akin pong palagay, ang solusyon po sa lumalaking populasyon sa ating bansa ay bigyan natin ng edukasyon ang bawat pamilya, ang bawat mag-asawa!*" Clad in a floor-length, midnight blue gown wreathed in a dramatic petticoat reminiscent of fairy tale princesses, Odessa Jones confidently sashays across the stage. A contestant of the 1st season of Miss Q and A (2018), a segment of the popular Filipino noontime variety show It's Showtime, Odessa Jones exhibited her quick wit and pageantry prowess. She landed in the top 10 and received the Best in Introduction Number special award. Odessa's skills and confidence came as no surprise, as her experience in bar shows, fiestas, and pageants began at the age of 16. After competing in Miss Q and A and gaining exposure, Odessa's experiences of discrimination have significantly decreased. Insults yelled at her on the streets have been replaced by strangers asking for pictures with her.

Outside of drag, Odessa is Robert, an uncle who helps provide financial assistance to his nieces and nephews. While Robert prefers the tranquility of staying in his room all day, Odessa prefers a rowdy and noisy environment. Conversely, Robert and Odessa are similar in their desires: *"Yung kaibigang masayahin."* Friends are crucial support systems in both Robert and Odessa's lives—fellow members of the LGBTQIA community who share the same struggles and jubilations.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Odessa's days were filled with movement, and in her words, *"Masaya. Araw araw kami umaalis."* She would travel from province to province, together with her fellow queens, meeting and interacting with different people every day. Aside from fiestas and pageants in provinces, Odessa would also book shows in metropolitan bars hosting drag shows.

However, due to the aesthetic burdens carried by drag queens who perform in gay bars and clubs, Odessa has long preferred performing at fiestas and pageants. "Pangkalawakan na ako. *Mas marami kita doon eh, mas* 'in.' '*Yung mga* drag queens *kumonti nga, gaya gaya na ngayon eh.*" Odessa asserts that *"masaya kasi 'yung pangkalawakan.* Miss Gay, *pangkalawakan, ganyan. 'Yung mga pangit na bakla, nagpapatawa-patawa."*

On stage, Odessa does not hold back—her songs and dances are fast. *"Nagwawala ako sa stage eh,"* she says, fervently differentiating herself from other kinds of drag queens who do not dance on stage. Wearing a full face of makeup formidably paired with her stage costume, passionately dancing and singing, Odessa's heart beats to the rhythm of the crowd's cheers.

As COVID-19 spread, Odessa's life was transformed from a life of congenial company, cheers, and movement to a life of solitude. Odessa struggled to stay afloat and was left with no choice but to stay at home and borrow money from friends as her savings depleted. Odessa recalls, *"Lahat halos ng kaibigan ko nautangan ko na nga eh,"* as no institution or organization was providing her the money she terribly needed. In Manila, Odessa's place of residence, sacks and boxes of aid were given monthly by the local government. She received this aid not as an informal worker out of work, but as a resident of the city. Wealthy members of the LGBTQIA community as well as LGBTQIA organizations were also actively handing out aid to LGBTQIA community members in need, and Odessa was one of their recipients. Despite financial difficulty, Odessa chose not to seek other employment, as she considers drag to be a job above all its other functions. *"Kung marunong lang nga ako, may puhunan akong ganun, nag-ganun* [online drag shows] *na ako. Kaso lang wala,"*

she says, instead relying only on friends to support her during such difficult times.

In September 2020, Odessa joined Enkangchaka, a group of drag queens who performed online three days a week for over a year through Facebook Live. At present, Odessa has returned to performing in fiestas and beauty contests. Physical or virtual, Odessa dreams of a drag community with less conflict and more respect, much like her experience during the pandemic. *"Isa lang naman gusto ko. Magkaisa kami sa isang* community. *'Wag kami maghilaan pababa, ganon lang. Kailangan respetuhan lang."*

Findings and Discussion

On Drag as a Transfigurative and Transformative Practice

Rebel Heart, Lady Gagita, and Odessa Jones have expressed that, as they don their drag look and embody their persona, they are consequently transformed into a more power-laden entity—an entity that masks their flaws and otherwise marginalized identities, i.e., their social reality. Lady Gagita found that her transfiguration remarkably elevates her status. Through drag, Gagita gains self-confidence and is approached with higher regard. For instance, most of the time, people line up to take pictures with her. Rebel Heart and Odessa Jones reported similar experiences. The participants recount how even those who have poked fun at their queerness indeed undergo a "suspension of disbelief." *"Minsan sisigawan pa kami, 'Ayan bakla! Papangit ng mga bakla, ang lalaki ng katawan ng mga bakla!' [...] Pero 'pag gabi naman makikita namin papalakpak naman sila sa amin. Sa umaga, lalaitin ka. Pero subukan mo sa gabi, panonoorin ka rin nila, papalakpakan ka rin nila,"* shares Odessa.

The celebrified status, however, provides both a protective and discriminatory function for the drag queens, a contradictory pattern prominent in the narratives. When drag queens have the capital to either conform to trends, or break through the existing mold of performance, they are somewhat protected from out-group discrimination—due largely to their celebrification. However, it has been observed that mainstreaming a certain style of drag, such as captured in RuPaul's Drag Race, may have led to the homogenization of the art form as Mimi Imfurst, RuPaul's Drag Race Season 3 alumna, said in her interview with Owens (2016). This becomes a concern when such mainstream drag is not as receptive or inclusive of its other shapes and forms. This could explain Odessa Jones' sentiment: *"Nahihirapan kami kasi maraming magagaling ngayon. Maraming magagaling na bata ngayon pasibol. ['Yung mga beteranong drag queen] tatayo lang sa entablado, 'di na papansinin. Papansinin [nila] 'yung baguhan. Mas marami silang pakulo sa katawan, mga wig nila ang gaganda. Mga* costume *nila."* It is possible that the feelings of neglect as a veteran drag queen that Odessa Jones shared are due to her drag persona and performances not conforming to the current trend of "highbrow" drag culture. So, while the transformative potential of drag lends a degree of protection to the transfigured identities of the drag queens through celebrification, it seems to simultaneously be discriminatory to drag queens who do not take on current trends.

Lady Gagita explained that the liminal phase, or the phase where the ephemeral transformation of their gender and social status occurs, is only breached as her aesthetic transfiguration is completed. However, due to drag queens' varied access to capital, not all transfigurations are created equally. Increased financial capital may mean an increased capacity to invest in higher quality wigs, makeup, contact lenses, and shapewear, as well as an increased opportunity to work with more

renowned costume designers. Some drag queens even undergo aesthetic enhancement procedures to enhance their drag. Odessa Jones, who claims to be in a precarious financial situation, has long preferred drag performances that are not tied to trendy and "highbrow" aesthetic value. Apart from providing her financial relief, Odessa Jones' preferred variety of drag is better received in spaces occupied by the masses, who subsequently constitute and provide her social capital. Without the network and connections that can broaden her financial capital, Odessa Jones claims her aesthetic transfiguration to be discordant with emerging drag trends.

As the stability of drag as a source of income can vary, the extent of a drag queen's celebrification can also be remarkably different, and its permanence as they enter reintegration consequently varies as well. While Rebel Heart and Odessa Jones find no significant changes as they regress from their transfigured state, Lady Gagita reportedly experiences elevation from her status of origin as she enters the reintegration phase. She observes that, following her social media breakthrough during the pandemic, she has been treated similarly to traditional artists and celebrities both before and after her transfiguration, and has been recently cast in acting gigs even as her lived identity, Vinzon. On the other hand, Odessa claims that her financial situation and lack of digital literacy to sustain online shows hindered her from transitioning online, which—as observed by the authors—have ultimately kept her from maintaining and diversifying her celebrification.

It can then be argued that a drag queen's identity and her transfigurative practice can expand or constrict activity spaces. Their access to various forms of capital, such as social and financial capital, affords them the necessary tools for transfiguration, such as makeup, wigs, and costumes, and technological affordances for the construction of a social media platform. The manner in which their celebrification manifests is contingent on their aesthetic or comedic value. Access and ownership of these apparatuses can result in transfigurations with higher aesthetic value, and in turn, more varied performativity. That is, their opportunities are not limited to comedy and entertainment. The opportune expansion of drag as a professional venture results in higher degrees or diversified forms of celebrification for Filipino drag queens, such that the transformation of their social status allows for enhanced participation in both broadcast and social media.

For drag queens like Rebel Heart and Lady Gagita who have the technological affordances and are digitally literate millennials, their drag personas allow for opportunities to build a career beyond performance—hosting events or serving as front acts, representatives, and spokespersons within and beyond their own communities. Drag abstracts class in that it detaches it from conventional socioeconomic distinctions and affixes it to the concept of "celebrity," especially seen as they secure influential positions in various forms of media. As drag queens ephemerally achieve celebrity status through professionalized, marketable forms of performance, they ritualistically become or feign as "agents of the power that was previously denied them" (Feldman & Hakim, 2020, p. 27).

"Celebrified" drag queens sanction greater visibility and diversity in representation. This allows them to further their involvement in matters of political significance. Consequently, they enjoy the privilege of viewing their drag career as a politicized experience. Drag queens' reiterative performance of "celebrity" highlights how they depend on the obfuscation of existing social categories (such as race, gender, sexuality, and class) during performances to bolster the "illusion" of their own prestige (Horowitz, 2012). The novel status they gain in their transfiguration allows them to see drag as both a subversive political activity and a conduit of access to the mainstream. Simply

put, their status renders it possible for them to challenge and subvert power whilst simultaneously demanding access to it (Feldman & Hakim, 2020). The broadening of their performance landscape places them in more varied activity spaces. Here, we see how socioeconomic class (marked by technological affordances) intersects with gender (marked by aesthetic transfiguration) and age (marked by level of digital literacy) in order to engender a unique experience of a degree of celebrification—or alternatively, marginalization.

On Activity Spaces for Drag Queens

Activity spaces, or the physical or virtual communities navigated by drag queens, directly influence their experiences, opportunities, and access to various forms of capital. Hence, drag queens' social and financial capital is contingent upon their activity spaces, which can in turn constrict or expand a their transfigurative practice. Such activity spaces are governed by influencing factors that determine the success of a drag queen.

Physical communities, particularly gay bars and clubs, are governed by ethical codes, specifically by traditional Filipino values like *utang na loob* (i.e., debt of gratitude) and pakikipagpalagayang-loob (i.e., being in-rapport, understanding, or acceptance with), a form of pakikipagkapwa or "human concern and interaction as one with others" (Enriquez, 1977; Enriquez, 1977, p.4). *Pakikipagpalagayang-loob,* a level and mode of interpersonal relations among Filipinos inextricable from the Filipino concept of *kapwa* (fellow human being), is expected in interactions where the individual is categorized as *Hindi-Ibang-Tao* or One-Of-Us.

While having a good relationship with their superiors serves a protective function, that protection vanishes when a drag queen gets into disputes with their seniors. A Filipino drag queen's chance of success in a gay bar or club is dependent on the extent to which they espouse or abandon *utang na loob* and *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* in their relationships with the mamamamahans (i.e., senior or tenured drag queens). Considered as subordinates yet regarded as family, or *Hindi-Ibang-Tao*, younger drag queens are expected to show gratitude towards and accept their *mamamamahans*' tutelage. As the *mamamamahans* closely coordinate with bar and club owners, espousal or abandonment of such cultural traits can either result in an increased regularity in being booked for performances or slackened interest as a sought-after drag artist. For instance, if a rookie drag queen exhibits rude behavior, whether intentionally or unintentionally, it may affect their seniors' regard for them. Regular booking or slackened interest can consequently determine a drag queen's access to social and financial capital. Hence, younger drag queens of ill-repute among senior or tenured drag queens are at risk of compromising drag performances as a lucrative endeavor.

Such is true for Rebel Heart's previous drag persona, Joux the Rose, who was no longer sought after as a consequence of her disputes with veteran drag queens who were bridled at her defiant demeanor. As the ones who oversee bookings and closely communicate with bar owners and patrons, senior drag queens expect a certain level of gratitude and deference from younger drag queens. In Rebel's interview, she recounts her *"maldita"* behavior, stating *"…alam mo 'yung minamalditahan ko kahit 'yung mga mamamamahan sa drag? 'Yung nakakatanda sa* drag *minamaldatihan ko 'yan!"* Eventually, Rebel had to resort to alternative sources of income, eventually abandoning her previous drag persona out of respect for her seniors, as well as out of concern over her tainted reputation and her craft's low profitability. Rebel explicitly states during her interview, *"Di ba nga nagmamaldita ako. So dumating sa point na walang tumanggap [sa akin*

sa mga gig]." The stronger the rapport and gratitude of a drag queen with and to her seniors, the greater her chances of success and therefore, increased access to social and financial capital.

Meanwhile, virtual communities are governed by equalizing forces brought about by the digital revolution. The emergence of the digital sphere has narrowed the divide among content creators of different backgrounds, as social media has granted its users "vehicles for unbridled public expression" (Hrynyshyn, 2017). The accessibility, convenience, and usability of social media bring in "new and less well-represented voices" into the public sphere, and everyone is granted the liberty to engage those within it (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014, as cited in Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). These equalizing forces challenge social inequities within the drag community, in that more drag queens of different backgrounds and creative strengths are now allowed to prosper. Greater diversity in representation in opened-up spaces of visibility can also mean that more drag queens are capable of attaining a microcelebrity status. Celebrification then leads to increased access to social and financial capital.

However, the seemingly equalizing forces can also serve discriminatory functions, as they may increase the vulnerability of the already vulnerable. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, people had turned to the internet in order to cope with the crisis; what was once perceived as a luxury had become an essential. But the transition to the digital sphere would expose a digital divide among people—that is, stark differences in their "technical and financial ability to utilize available technology and access the internet" (Rasure, 2022). Factors such as location, income, household size, age, gender, physical ability, and education resulted in a digital divide (Ibrahim, 2022).

This seems to be true in the case of drag queens as well. In an interview, Drag Queen Aries shared how she believes that online drag is only for those who can afford it (Cruz & Galang, 2020). Rebel Heart shared the same sentiment, saying, "Imagine, *gastos din eh. Bibili ka ng ilaw,* backdrop *mo,* costume. *Gastos pa rin siya, sobrang hirap ng* transition." As earlier mentioned, Odessa Jones claimed she was not able to transition online during the lockdown due to lack of finances and technological affordances to utilize and access available technology.

Activity spaces then serve as differentiating factors in the social realities of Filipino drag queens. For Lady Gagita and Rebel Heart, technological affordances and financial capital made them feel that they had fared much better in comparison to how they were doing prior to their transition to virtual communities. As Lady Gagita expressed, "Actually, *mas* nag-bloom *ako noong* pandemic *kasi marami akong mga nalaman na noong* pandemic *ko lang siya magagawa* [...] Way before nag-lockdown, *kinuha na ako ng* Shoppee as an official livestreamer. Before pandemic *pa, noong nag*-launch *sila ng* live streaming, *kumuha sila ng iba't ibang influencers at isa ako sa mga influencer na kinuha nila*." Rebel Heart also had similar sentiments, saying, "*Totoo naisantabi pansamantala si* Rebel Heart, but *nung nauso 'yung* online show, *doon mas nag*-boom *ulit si* Rebel Heart."

Odessa Jones did not experience performing online. She recounted that she did not consider shifting online to either find an alternative livelihood or perform drag in different social media platforms. She said, *"Kung marunong lang nga ako, may puhunan akong ganun, nag-ganun* [online selling] *na ako. Kaso lang talagang wala."* Instead, Odessa Jones hoped that more bars would open so that other drag queens like her could perform again.

Since virtual communities offer more leeway for performance variability, Lady Gagita and Rebel Heart were in the position to capitalize on developments in the art of drag and consequently conform to ever-changing drag trends. Conformity to drag trends keeps their performances marketable, and allows them to maintain their status as micro-celebrities.

It is important to note, however, that there are nuances in the degree of success that Lady Gagita and Rebel Heart were both able to achieve in virtual communities. That is, their success could also be ascribed to their activity spaces prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of Lady Gagita, it was observed that enabling conditions in her previous activity spaces allowed her to better preserve her status as a microcelebrity.

Odessa Jones felt that she did not fare as well during the pandemic due to her lack of technological affordances. *"Sila nag-oonline-online. Ako hindi,"* she says. Odessa Jones mostly navigated physical communities, performing and competing in fiestas, pageants, and noontime shows. These spaces are often occupied by the masses, more receptive to drag performances of higher comedic value or of segments containing "middlebrow compromise." Dwight Macdonald (1960) coined the term middlebrow compromise to refer to performances which merely pretend to respect the standards of High Culture, while in fact, watering down and vulgarizing them for perceived shock value. Audiences in fiestas and gigs in bars, according to Odessa, are more receptive to *"chaka"* (comedically ugly) drag queens who do not exude the same sartorial splendor as drag queens who perform in the trendy gay bars and clubs in the metro. In narrating the difference between her versions of Odessa Jones, she says,

> *"Ah, sa bar naman iba. 'Yung pagsho-show namin iba naman 'yun. Iba atake namin. Kailangan sosyal ka doon. Sa Enkangchaka pwede bara bara, kahit ano lang. Pero 'pag drag queen ka, kailangan sosyal, maganda damit mo, maganda bihis mo, maganda itsura mo kailangan. Eh sa Enkangchaka naka two piece ka lang kahit ano itsura mo pwede na eh. 'Pag drag queen ka kailangan maganda itsura mo, maganda costume mo. Iba-iba talaga. Mamumuhunan ka rin talaga, kung gusto mo pera mamumuhunan ka sa mga costume, sa mga wig. May manager kasi ako may humahawak s'akin, kaya hindi ako gumagastos. Pero 'yung budget ko naman hati, 70-30."*

The current drag trend in the country favors drag performances of higher aesthetic value, containing highbrow culture. This has barred Odessa from access to social and financial capital—a manifestation of the digital divide in the drag community. Again, we see how socioeconomic class (marked by technological affordances and access to certain activity spaces) intersects with age (marked by level of digital literacy) to also engender a unique experience of celebrification—or marginalization.

Drag Houses as a Parallel Social Structure

Upon assuming a drag persona, drag queens gain access to two familial structures—their biological family and their drag or built family. During the pandemic, this social capital proved increasingly vital in abating and protecting the drag queens from the negative consequences of the pandemic. Across the three drag queens interviewed, there is a consistent declaration of the precedence of their built families in their well-being.

When Odessa Jones was struggling to stay afloat during the pandemic, it was her built family whom she turned to for financial assistance. While the emergence of the online drag scene has revealed disparities in terms of who possesses enough capital to adapt to an increasingly commercialized drag culture, such revelation has prompted younger drag queens to support senior drag queens who lack the technological affordances to hold online drag shows.

Built families, or drag families, are formally known as *drag houses.* A typical drag house is composed of a mother and an illimitable number of daughters. A hierarchy exists within the houses, wherein the mother is the authority figure, sought for guidance and mentorship by her drag daughters. Similar to biological families, the head of the drag house, the drag mother, holds the most financial, human, and social capital. It is thus a drag mother's responsibility to provide financial and emotional support and pass down industry knowledge and various performative skills to her daughters.

As a drag mother, Lady Gagita would often host online drag shows in her own residence in Manila for her drag sisters and drag daughters experiencing mental health hardships brought by the pandemic. In September 2020, Lady Gagita organized a show to celebrate her birthday entitled *#Cancelledt: The Lady Gagita Birthday Show,* a showcase of the talents of her drag babies, and a fundraising event for the benefit of drag queens who, at the time, had no source of income due to the closure of bars and other establishments.

Regardless of drag house, drag queens refer to one another as "drag sisters." In being called a sister, Passa (2021) observes that "the boundaries of drag houses are much more blurred than in biological families, since everyone can join a drag house and be called "sister." Kinship terms such as *mamamamahan, anak* or *nakshie,* and sister or kapatid, may be indicative of the deficit of and need for supportive familial figures. The drag house as a parallel family reflects the drag queens' experiences of marginalization within their own biological families, and serves to protect the drag queens from the discrimination they experience from their biological families.

While the three drag queens in this study are accepted by their biological families, this acceptance is conditional and discriminates against drag queens whose drag is unprofitable. The profitability of drag influences the degree to which a drag queen's queer identity is accepted by her biological family. Upon witnessing the ability of drag to yield profit and sustain drag queens as well as their other family members, members of the drag queens' families began to support and recognize drag as a valid and legitimate career option. Rebel Heart's biological family, for instance, became more accepting and supportive of her gender and drag as a performance art. As Lady Gagita's drag career gained traction and produced enough income to put food on the table and pay off her parents' debts, her parents were roused to finally support her career wholeheartedly. Similarly, Odessa Jones' family came to accept her drag identity due to the financial support she is able to give to her nieces and nephews.

Conclusion

A Filipino drag queen assumes two identities—her lived identity and her drag persona. Drag queens traverse these two identities by undergoing a process of transfiguration, actualized through the use of aesthetic apparatuses. This transfigurative process enables an ephemeral transformation of drag queens' gender identity and expression, and their social status. Such transformative potential,

especially as they undergo celebrification, allows them access to relations they would otherwise be unable to attain.

The duplex identity of a drag queen is performed in subsequent activity spaces, or their spaces of employment, residence, and recreation—whether physical or virtual. Their ability to perform their identities in these activity spaces is mediated by factors such as their access to financial capital and the lucrativeness of their drag career (i.e., class), as well as their age—factors that constitute their social location.

There exists a dialectical relationship between their duplex identity and activity spaces. The activity spaces they navigate as they transfigure into their drag personas and regress from this transfigured state can expand or constrict the degree of their transfiguration, and in turn, the transformation of their lived realities and material conditions. On one hand, liberties to unbridled public expression in virtual communities allow for performance variability, which consequently allow for greater conformity to drag trends, greater marketability, greater potential for celebrification, and increased social and financial capital. Since virtual communities offer more leeway for performance variability, drag queens like Lady Gagita and Rebel Heart are in the position to capitalize developments in the art of drag and consequently conform to ever-changing drag trends. Conformity to drag trends keeps their performances marketable, and allows them to maintain their status as microcelebrity practitioners (p. 95). By the same token, the absence of liberties to vibrant public expression in physical communities discourages performance variability, which then leads to limited conformity to drag trends, reduced marketability, lesser potential for celebrification, and decreased social and financial capital. On the other hand, the qualities espoused by a Filipino drag queen's lived and transfigured identities can expand or constrict the activity spaces they are able to traverse. The transfigured identities, or drag personas, of higher aesthetic value, i.e., Filipino drag queens with greater access to capital, are allowed greater performance variability. This results in expansion of their conduits for personal and artistic expression, and in turn, broadens their performance landscape. Such conditions place them in more varied, and reportedly more enabling, professional environments or activity spaces.

Although the transformative function of drag provides some protection to drag queens by way of elevated social status, broadened networks, and access to parallel social structures (i.e., drag houses or parallel families), it can also allow for discrimination as their commercialization—and now mainstream assimilation—leaves behind drag queens without significant social, financial, and technological capital, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This often meant abandoning drag performance for more lucrative sources of income to provide for their families. Ultimately, it is their parallel social structures—their collective efforts and a strong sense of community—that offer them protection and aid in buffering negative effects prevalent in times of crisis.

Exploring the dialectical relationship between their duplex identity and activity spaces—the affordances this enables and disables them to have, the ties this enables or disables them to form, and the experiences this enables or disables them to encounter—knits the fabric of a Filipino drag queen's social reality. The lived experiences of Rebel Heart, Lady Gagita, and Odessa Jones then invites us to augment the planes in which we employ the concept of intersectionality.

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