'We love gay': Yassification and Appropriation in Mainstream Culture

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The sheer number of queer media and cultural references generated in the past year feels historic in proportion. In terms of representation, queer individuals, and the perspectives they generate, appear to have found themselves nestled at the centre of mainstream culture. Television shows like *Queer Eye* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* have garnered national and international followings, and on social media, queer language seems to have seeped into the very fabric of English slang with queer TikTokers at the core of many of the past year's most popular trends. However, I would be lying to myself if I didn't admit that as a relatively well-adjusted gay man, something about these translations of queerness into mainstream culture feels empty.

What encapsulates this emptiness for me is a video posted by comedian Meg Stalter on Twitter back in June 2021. Captioned 'Corporations this month:', the video opens with Stalter addressing the camera directly with an exaggerated smile saying 'Hi gay! Happy Pride month.' She goes on as her character in this fictitious commercial to enthusiastically offer deals and discounts specifically for LGBT+ individuals while awkwardly mixing and mincing queer slang. At one point, she even goes so far as to say, 'We love gay and it's awesome.' Although the portrayal could be taken as a light-hearted exaggeration of well-intentioned support by companies during Pride Month, for me, it's the reduction of queer identity for consumptive purposes that presents itself as the much greater issue.

However, this reduction of queerness for the purpose of palatable consumption is not only limited to corporate communications but extends into the greater professional and user-generated culture and entertainment industry. Language and cultural tropes are often taken from queer communities, many of which whose marginality is intersectional such as along the lines of race, class, and gender, and stripped of their meaning to be consumed and enjoyed for their novelty and productive possibilities in the general population.

Some of these moments of appropriation are blatant like the white celebrity Shawn Mendes, who identifies as straight, using the phrase 'It's giving... Cher' recorded as a soundbite while getting ready for the Met Gala with his girlfriend Camila Cabello. This is a clear appropriation of language and iconography that is emblematic of the centuries-old 'ball culture' established by many poor, black and brown, queer individuals in New York City. However, other problematic adaptations of queer culture are more pernicious such as the original series and eventual franchising of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.
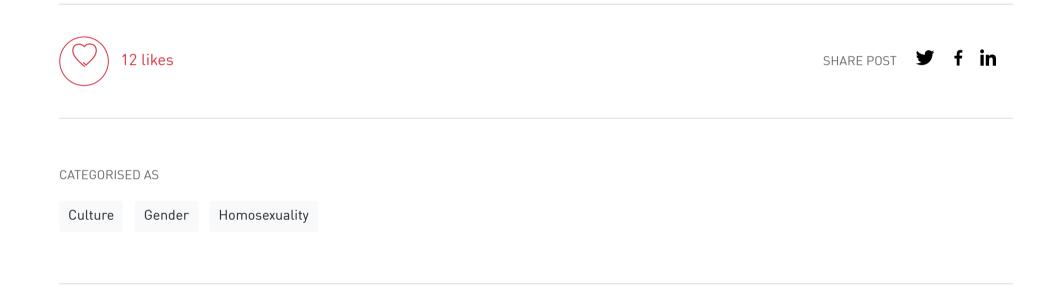
Although *RuPaul's Drag Race* appears as a distinctly progressive and queer representation that has helped broach real topics aligned with queer identity, and drag specifically, it still falters in the face of capitalistic pressures. Economic privilege is required to support the makeup and clothing that contestants need to compete, straying from the lower economic class

roots of the practice. In addition, the definition of drag itself is often reduced to a specific form of heightened femininity which ignores the other categorical possibilities for performance across conceptions such as 'realness' and the drag kings.

Yet, a clear classification of whether queer media influences or is appropriated by mainstream culture is oftentimes impossible to accomplish. Nowhere is this more evident than in the debate within the queer community about 'gay media for straight people.' This media is defined by some as queer representations that are made to fit heteronormative forms or adhere to stereotypical expectations of queer life for mass consumption. However, other queer individuals claim that these mainstream acceptance of some forms of queerness represents a progressive step in the direction of wider acceptance for LGBT+ people.

For myself, I agree that it could be possible that 'gay media for straight people' has a certain progressive element to its influence. The key pin here is that this type of media must actually produce some form of 'yassification', meaning to make something queerer, rather than just fit itself to the standards and expectations of the mainstream, heteronormative culture. And how this can be accomplished, is through the widespread sharing of queer culture in a way that maintains its fullness and roots to the radical and intersectional heart of what it means to be a part of the queer community. Both as queer individuals and allies, I believe, we must fight for the retention of the radical possibility and creativity that has been historically provided by queerness and continues to be provided today.

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