

Stop Relying on That Body: The Sexual Objectification of the Pit Crew on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

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Accompanying [Literature Review](#)

Introduction: Category Is...*Drag Race*

Nothing has taken the internet by storm in recent years quite like drag. Once a niche underground queer subculture in the late twentieth century, the world of gender-bending performance art has spread like wildfire in the past decade or so through gifs, memes, quotes, videos, and viral moments due to the immense popularity of the Emmy award-winning television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, or *Drag Race* or *RPDR* for short, premiered in 2009 as a competition between a cast of drag queens to see who could become "America's Next Drag Superstar." With 33 seasons and counting under its belt from franchises across the globe, *Drag Race* has mastered the television formula for success. A diverse and entertaining cast, shocking twists, entertaining challenges, witty one-liners, and enough reality television-style drama to rival TLC, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has proved it is here to stay.

As a show placing queer voices to the front of the conversation, increasing awareness about important issues to the LGBTQ+ community, it has been celebrated by queer people and allies alike. Specifically, *Drag Race* has positioned itself to not only be a safe space for queer people but also the issues they face, with body positivity, among others, often being at the forefront. With emotional moments focused on lifting up queens regardless of size and giving platforms to contestants to share experiences and issues they face with body image, *Drag Race's* focus on highlighting these issues over its many seasons and to its millions of global viewers has been widely celebrated. However, *Drag Race* is not without its flaws, even with issues it has been lauded for like body positivity, and it is time that these issues are talked about. One such issue is the Pit Crew.

The Pit Crew has been a fixture of *Drag Race* since its very first season. They are a group of scantily-clad male models that assist in challenges and are usually present at least once or more in an episode. These men are rarely wearing more than a pair of skimpy, tight underwear and many of the challenges they assist in involve something to do with their bodies, general appearance, sexuality, or general sex appeal. A casting call for the Pit Crew for *RuPaul's Drag Race UK Series 1* even called for men who "must be over 6ft have no tattoos and have an athletic and toned physique" (Talent Talks, 2018). There were a small handful of articles by smaller queer news publications that brought this seeming issue of hypocrisy up. In their article, PinkNews highlighted how "Many noted the contrast between the blunt casting call and the show's body-positive

message for drag queens.” (Duffy, 2019). Queerty stated how, “[the show’s] Pit Crew has long featured muscular, gym bunny, gogo boys types rather than the bears, twinkles and average “boy next door” types who stan the show in droves.” (Villarreal, 2019). However, the conversation just ends there. No follow up. No pressure on the show to change. Seemingly in the long run three years later, no care that it happened at all. For a show that allegedly is body positive, there seems to be a complete lack of issue with sexually objectifying people for the show’s benefit, and the audiences don’t seem to care either.

In this essay, I will begin with an overview of how scholars define sexualization and sexual exploitation and their distinct meanings. I will then look at the abundance of sexual objectification of the Pit Crew in show and the various forms it takes on and discuss how those negative effects could impact the show. I will then explore the negative effects of sexual objectification on both the viewers of the sexualized media as well as the participants in that media. I will then conclude with what *RuPaul’s Drag Race* should do moving forward if it hopes to live up to its promise of being a body positive and queer beacon in television media.

Mighty Lust: What is (and isn’t) Sexual Objectification?

In the discussions around this topic of sexual content in media and its impacts, two terms are frequently cited: sexualization and sexual objectification. Both terms are relevant to the discussion of sexual content as a whole, but the issue arises in the way the terms are used. More specifically, the way the terms are frequently used interchangeably as if they mean the same thing. Although similar, the terms are certainly distinct in their denotation and refer to different phenomena in the field. The definitions of each differ slightly between scholars but follow the same general principles. As defined by Fasoli et al. (2017), sexualization is “a phenomenon that implies attention on the person’s appearance and thus can assume different shades: It can be merely beauty-based, namely, focusing on physical beauty, or sexually-based, namely, focusing on the person’s sexual features and expected desires by implying his/her sexual readiness” (338). In the same article, Fasoli et al. (2017) defines sexual objectification as “a representation of a person as a mere body/object for others’ sexual desires” (338). Other scholars seem to agree and follow these same general definitions while outlining these terms, with Bernard et al. (2020) defining sexualization as, “an emphasis on sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to other people” and sexual objectification as the phenomenon, “to appraise them as bodies and sexual body parts and behave toward them as if they were objects” (134). Although the terms may be used interchangeably by the general public, the scholarly definitions are distinct, with sexualization being a generalized increase in appearance in a sexual manner and sexual objectification being a phenomenon when sexualization reaches the point where the person being viewed is no longer a person, but an item with the sole purpose of sexual appeal. Although the men certainly are sexualized and experience sexualization, the term “sexual objectification” is a better representation of their treatment, as they are often reduced to objects of sexual desire, and “sexual objectification” goes further than just highlighting their sexuality.

Sexy, Sexy Pit Crew: Sexual Objectification of the Pit Crew

Within the show *RPDR*, there are a plethora of examples where the Pit Crew is sexually objectified via multiple methods and parties. Each of these situations often take place during the mini challenges near the start of each episode with at least one or more mini challenges featuring the Pit Crew present in a season. Those methods that will be explored are sexual comments and innuendos from both RuPaul and the queens, editing to emphasize their bodies, and being deliberately put into sexual and suggestive situations with the contestants.

The most frequent and prominent example of sexual objectification towards the Pit Crew is present in the form of sexual comments directed at the Pit Crew from both RuPaul and the contestants themselves. These comments can range from mildly suggestive innuendos to blatant sexually charged comments directed towards them. In Season 5, RuPaul, when viewing a member of the Pit Crew in their underwear stated, “Damn, you’re gonna put somebody’s eyes out with that thing” and “How did we end up in the meatpacking district”. Ru also stated when playing with another contestant that, “I don’t know why, but I’m craving a corn dog” (*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, 2020, 1:47). However, it is not just Ru that makes sexual comments about the Pit Crew and their appearances, but the queens themselves. In Season 7, contestant Ginger Minj, upon seeing the men come out, stated “I’m taking in the buffet right now...It’s like Epcot for the thirsty b*tches.” and fellow season 7 contestant Katya, upon starting her turn, stating “I don’t know what the rules of this game are. I don’t care what they are. Just when do I get to blow them?” (*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, 2020, 6:56). These comments, equating the Pit Crew to food or an amusement attraction or even just asking when they can be sexually used, amongst many other comments, are not rare during these challenges. They are frequent and prevalent and often within earshot of the members of the Pit Crew. These comments reducing them to solely sexual objects (and sometimes even directly comparing them to objects) are all too common.

The editing of the show itself also contributes to the Pit Crew’s objectification. During nearly every moment that shows the men walking onto the set for the challenge the footage is accompanied by the overlays of the queen’s comments about their attractiveness. The shots of the Pit Crew are often scanning their bodies head to toe and often focus on their midsection, displaying their rippling torsos and their often-sponsored underwear and prominent “packages.” In the challenges showing the Pit Crew pulling down their pants (in which there are many), there is always a targeted focus and close-up shot on that action (*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, 2020). In one instance there was even a “wolf whistle” sound effect edited over one of the queens talking about how attractive the Pit Crew was (*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, 2020, 3:48). It’s not just the actual participants present with the Pit Crew but additionally the production and editing team behind the show that also treat these men like they are purely objects of sexual desire.

For the contestants, it isn’t just some comments that objectify the Pit Crew, but they are often put into blatantly sexual or suggestive physical positions with the men in order to emphasize just how sexy and attractive they are. In the All Stars Season 2 mini challenge “Butt Butt Golf”, the queens were required to swing a difficult-to-wield object around their waist to hit a ball through the Pit Crew’s legs and into a hole. This inevitably led to every single contestant being forced to press up against the Pit Crew’s bodies in typically sexual positions to maneuver the ball (*RuPaul’s Drag Race*, 2020, 13:13). In the Season 11 mini challenge “Balls to the Wall”, the queens were

required to carry a ball to a basket in pairs with members of the Pit Crew but could not use their hands to do so. The pairs were forced to carry the balls in positions such as hip-to-hip, shoulder-to-butt, head-to-butt, butt-to-butt, butt-to-crotch, crotch-to-crotch, and any other various combination of those body parts to cause suggestive contact between the contestants and the Pit Crew (*RuPaul's Drag Race*, 2020, 22:20). In Season 9, there was even a mini challenge that was purely described as the queens needing to, "...shoot a sexy selfie with [The Pit Crew]" which lead to the queens ending up in suggestive positions with the Pit Crew (*RuPaul's Drag Race*, 2020, 15:23). Each of these instances involved the show reducing the members of the Pit Crew to purely sexualized bodies with the express purpose to serve as a sexually-charged counterpart to the queens in the challenge.

Sexual objectification, in the most often used sense, reduces a person to purely an element of sexual desire. I would argue that *RPDR* takes this already heinous display of sexual objectification even further. Often in the mini-challenges, the show uses the Pit Crew in place of inanimate objects on multiple occasions and takes the term sexual objectification to a very literal level. On three separate seasons (Season 5, Season 10, *Drag Race Canada* Season 1), the point of the mini-challenge is for the queens to match the numbered members of the Pit Crew by revealing their matching colors of underwear. This is essentially a glorified game of memory with the cards being substituted for sexualized human beings (*RuPaul's Drag Race*, 2020). In the aforementioned "Butt Butt Golf," the Pit Crew was made to stand legs spread with animal masks on their head and be human croquet hoops (*RuPaul's Drag Race*, 2020, 13:13). In Season 6, the mini-challenge was a take on hangman called "Hung Man" where the Pit Crew had letters duct-taped to their butts and had to turn around to reveal letters that the queens would have to guess. In each of these scenarios, *RPDR* takes sexual objectification to an extreme level, turning these people into glorified sexy game-piece props. *Drag Race* does not just objectify the Pit Crew into sexualized people, but often reduces them to literal sexy objects.

Everybody Say Judge: The Effects of Sexual Objectification on the Objectified

The severe sexual objectification of the Pit Crew, with some members serving across multiple seasons for multiple years, likely has had a negative effect on these men being objectified. The concept that an individual is reduced to a sexual object in the eyes of a viewer has various negative effects on the person being objectified and has been studied throughout various forms of pop culture media. These negative effects fall into two major areas: social perception and identity perception.

Effects on Social Perception

The effects that sexual objectification has on the perception of those being objectified regarding social interaction is quite extensive and severe, with many being subconscious as a result of the way the brain categorizes sexual bodies. The human brain evaluates different types of things in different ways, with human bodies and faces processed as whole beings, or configurally, inanimate objects processed as a collection of various elements in no particular, analytical

arrangement. Bernard et al. (2020) in their paper “The Sexualization–Objectification Link: Sexualization Affects the Way People See and Feel Toward Others” suggests that sexualized human bodies have been found to be more analytically processed in the human brain, as an object world, as opposed to being configurally processed, which is the way a person is typically processed. In this same study by Bernard et al. (2020), it was discussed that using eye-tracking technology, people tend to focus on the faces of sexualized bodies less and the bodies more than nonsexualized bodies. People are more likely to view sexualized bodies as objects instead of people, hence the term “sexual objectification.”

The impacts of perceiving people as objects, however, is quite severe, as when a person is perceived as less-than-human, they potentially get treated less-than-human. Compared to nonsexualized women, sexualized women are perceived as “possessing less warmth, less competence, less mind, less moral status, and less agency” (Bernard et al., 2020, p. 136). Additionally, research from the same study into the concept of empathy towards sexualized and nonsexualized women found that, both on the conscious and subconscious level, people tended to be less empathetic towards sexualized women than nonsexualized women.

Some may say that because men and women are different and are viewed by society in different ways that research about the sexual objectification of women cannot be extrapolated when applied to men. Although I would agree that men and women are viewed differently by society that does not mean that this research could not potentially be applied to men for two major reasons. First, there is a significant gap in scholarly research between sexual objectification of women and sexual objectification of men, with research about women making up the vast majority of the scholarly conversation around sexual objectification. Secondly, this is not about conscious judgment of individuals, but subconscious ways your brain automatically processes sexualized figures. It has already been researched that there are negative effects on one’s views of their own body (another subconscious opinion that one cannot control) after viewing sexualized content across both men and women (Lorenzen et al., 2004). Therefore, with a lack of research concerning the subject, one could assume that the subconscious reactions of individuals, similar to body satisfaction, may also apply to the subconscious perception of sexualized figures outside of themselves.

Effects on Identity Perception

Sexual objectification additionally has an impact on how sexualized individuals are viewed as people across multiple facets of media regarding their identity and characteristics. In a study done by Elizabeth A. Daniels and Jennifer Ruh Linder (2021) titled “Sex Object vs. Athlete: Boys’ and Men’s Responses Toward Sexualized Male Athletes,” a comparison was done between sexualized and performance images of male athletes and found that the athletes in the sexualized images were rated to have lower esteem, or being likeable and a role model, and lower competence, or having talent and athleticism, but higher sex appeal (Daniels & Linder 2021). A study done by Fasoli et al. (2017) entitled “Shades of Sexualization: When Sexualization Becomes Sexual Objectification” found similar results, but as opposed to being images of athletes they utilized images of models. Their findings also found that increased sexualization in images led to a decrease in ratings of competence. For images of men, the models in the sexualized images were additionally rated as less masculine with the increased amount of sexualization (Fasoli et al., 2017).

Looking Good, Feeling Terrible: The Effects of Sexualized Media on its Audience

While sexual objectification certainly impacts the participant in the media, the general increase in sexualized content as a result of this objectification has a negative impact on the viewer of that media as well.

Effects of Sexualized Content on Male Body Image

There have been numerous studies discussing the effects of sexualized and idealized body content on body image and body dissatisfaction, but much of that research concerned the effects that sexualized images of women had on the body satisfaction of women. Although there has not been as substantial a body of work around male body image, the scholarly research that has been conducted paints a similar picture. When presented with images of average men vs muscular men, men who were shown images of muscular men had a decline in body satisfaction before and after viewing the images when men who viewed the average men did not (Lorenzen et al., 2004). Other research agrees, with another study having a decrease in men's body satisfaction after viewing muscular men and slender men in advertisements as opposed to product only advertisements (Blashill, 2010) The concept that men being exposed to sexualized and idealized versions of their own bodies causing a decrease in body satisfaction aligns with the widely-accepted fact that sexualized and idealized imagery of women's bodies causes body dissatisfaction in women (Lorenzen et al., 2004). Although all men would certainly bear the effects of this sexualized context, this decline in body satisfaction could be amplified to a select group of men in particular. Gay and bisexual men have been shown to already have lower body satisfaction rates than heterosexual men, with gay men also having lower rates than lesbian women and being similar to heterosexual women (Basabas et al., 2019).

Negative Effects of Body Dissatisfaction in Queer Men

Although people across various sexualities and genders can enjoy *RPDR*, the target demographic of the show is queer men. Additionally, queer men have worse body image rates than other gender and sexuality groups. Therefore, I believe a deeper analysis into the negative effects queer men experience as a result of poor body image is necessary. There are a few negative effects that poor body satisfaction rates have shown to have on queer men. Poor body satisfaction rates in queer and bisexual men have a negative impact on sexual performance, with a lower positive perception of the body and an increased desire to be more muscular correlating to erectile dysfunction and poor body self-evaluation and poor body image during sex correlating to premature ejaculation (Levitan et al., 2018). Queer men's body dissatisfaction could also impact their lives outside the bedroom. Gay men with higher rates of body fat dissatisfaction also had higher rates of "depression, eating restraint, eating concerns, and social sensitivity" while those higher rates of muscular dissatisfaction also had higher rates of "social sensitivity" (Blashill, 2010, p. 314).

Step It Up: Why Does This Matter? What Should *Drag Race* Do?

RuPaul's Drag Race clearly has an issue with the sexualization and sexual objectification of its Pit Crew, and research would suggest that this likely has severely negative effects on both the members of the Pit Crew and the audience of *RPDR* predominantly made up of a community that already has lower body image satisfaction. However, one might ask if it is even the show's responsibility to do something about it. I would argue that not only is this a problem that needs to be fixed, but it is the show's inherent responsibility to do so.

RuPaul's Drag Race, since its conception, has been portrayed as a safe space for queer people. A space for queer people to watch other queer people embrace their true selves, speak about their struggles, and establish community with one another. Specifically, with the topic of body positivity, *RPDR* has often been a platform for queens to talk about and highlight body image and the importance of body positivity around conversations about weight loss and gain, eating disorders, plastic surgery, bullying and prejudice, and various other issues relevant to the queer community and their bodies and resonate with many viewers who may also be struggling. In Season 9, when addressing a joke made by a queen the previous week, contestant Sasha Velour opened up about her lengthy struggles with anorexia, and fellow contestant Valentina spoke about her struggles with her eating disorder while filming the show. The queens also highlighted how prevalent eating disorders were in the gay community and how many of them had those shared experiences (*RuPaul's Drag Race*, 2017). In UK Season 2, contestant Victoria Scone, who is plus-sized, addressed a comment made towards her from a fellow contestant about her size and discussed her struggles with bulimia and accepting her size (Ahluwalia, 2021). *RPDR* certainly deserves praise for the way that it has handled many of these topics over the years and acted as a platform for marginalized people to speak about their body struggles. However, that does not mean that *RPDR* is above criticism and should get a pass in other areas where the show could improve just because it has done good in the past with some aspects of body image. *Drag Race* should want to continue to strive for excellence in its creation of the body positive and body inclusive space that is its program and address this long-overdue issue in their show that is the sexual objectification of the Pit Crew. *Drag Race* has established itself as a body positive safe space for queer people and, because if this, now has a responsibility to uphold that to their community.

So, then, what should *Drag Race* do? Well, the best place to start would be with what the show has already done. In 2020, *Canada's Drag Race (CDR)* Season 1 was unique in many ways. Not only was it the first franchise to be hosted by a former contestant or to be the first franchise to be set in North America outside of the original series, but the first franchise to have a Pit Crew that looked a bit different. Season 1 Of *CDR* featured the first-ever plus-sized Pit Crew member. Appearing in Episode 4 as a guest member, plus-sized model Mina Gerges was featured as a member of the *CDR* Pit Crew and assisted in the underwear memory game mini challenge. On the surface, the feedback and reaction was positive from news publications and media outlets. In *Out Magazine's* article "Mina Gerges Is Bringing Body Diversity to 'Drag Race's Pit Crew" where Gerges is interviewed, he states, "I think it's so incredibly important to show that beauty doesn't look like one certain size and that it comes in many shapes and sizes." and the author emphasizing how his appearance made history for the show (Street, 2020). However, the reaction under the surface perhaps was not as universally positive, specifically from some fans. Gerges, after his appearance on the show, tweeted "I've read hundreds of comments from gay men labeling, criticizing, and analyzing my body and it's really not cute. Just appreciate that you're finally seeing body diversity on the Pit Crew instead of having something negative to say about it." (Mina, 2020).

It certainly seems as if some viewers of the show reacted negatively towards his appearance, but many also reacted positively. Does this mean that this effort was a wash? That this attempted solution (or start of one) was a failure? In my view, it is a bit more complicated than that.

RPDR has both perpetuated and fought against body toxicity. It has both uplifted those of different sizes while forcing others into narrow boxes of sexual attractiveness. In short, Drag Race is feeding the fire as it is attempting to extinguish it. Obviously, this creates a problem, with *Drag Race* both imparting positive and negative influences on its audiences when it comes to body image. This could lead to the same fans that rally behind a queen that speaks about their struggles with an eating disorder having no problem spewing vitriol towards a Pit Crew member for not fitting the cookie-cutter definition of a sexy muscular model. If the show truly intends to be a place of body positivity, it needs to focus on supporting all facets of body positivity instead of uplifting different sizes in some areas and perpetuating harmful body standards in others. If the show truly intends to be a place of inclusivity, it needs to rethink its definition of “sexy” and how sexual objectification can negatively affect their viewers and the Pit Crew. Pit Crew members of varying body sizes, less emphasis on their sexual nature, and less of a reduction of the men to objects would be substantial improvements the show could make to transform *RuPaul’s Drag Race* into a more body positive and inclusive program. All aspects of the show, from the contestants to the challenges to the storylines and even the Pit Crew, need to strive to be increasingly body positive and body inclusive for the sake of its viewers and its community.

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