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Drag Kids: When Outfits Become Activism

I asked a 7-year-old his definition of a ‘drag kid’ and he responded with “a boy who wears sparkly and rainbow clothing, high heels and beautiful makeup” (Appendix A, Q3, 2023). 9-year-old Nemis (Queen Lactatia) describes a drag kid as “a [boy] who puts on a feminine persona (Wennberg, 2019). It seems straightforward and simple, yet the public discourse surrounding drag kids is complex and controversial. As I researched the world of drag kids, unexpected themes emerged, especially related to child advocacy and social change. There were many parallels between the most prolific drag kid, Desmond Napoles and perhaps the most famous environmental child activist Greta Thunberg. What insights can we learn by studying the similarities between these two youth? A young boy dressing not only in feminine clothing but embodying the most extreme hyper-feminine styles can be perceived as an act of courage in our current society. How do ideas of participation and protection relate to the self-expression of drag kids? Our current culture attributes characteristics to things such as colours, where pink often represents “girlish sensitivity, grace and homosexuality” (Vänskä, 2019, p. 303). How do drag kids challenge common gender stereotypes and why does this matter? Finally, this paper will discuss some limitations in the current research of children. Are younger children often excluded from participating in research, or are their voices deemed less influential and important? What are the benefits of more participatory research with children experiencing unique lifeworlds, such as those who identify as drag kids?

An Important Note

The definitions of a ‘drag kid’ used in the introduction of this paper originate from two children. My research for this paper has found examples of young boys who fit completely into these definitions, they enjoy wearing sparkly clothing, makeup and high heels or acting in a

feminine way at times, yet do not label themselves as drag kids (Kellan Patrick, 2023). Some children view public performances and voguing competitions as an important aspect of being a drag kid (Wennberg, 2019). In my opinion, there is no inherent necessary connection between a child's sexuality or gender identity and them choosing to label themselves as a drag kid.

McNamee states that “the *new paradigm* of childhood in part involves viewing children as having agency, the capacity to make choices, and to impose those choices on the world” (2016, p. 33). I personally believe any child, of any sexual orientation or gender identity can choose to label themselves as a drag kid. There are numerous examples of drag kids used within this paper, however their individual experiences should not be seen as an accurate portrayal of every drag kid, in every part of the world. The definition of a drag kid is fluid and evolving, and it should be defined first and foremost by the children who are currently using this label.

The Poster Child

The most famous drag kid is arguably Desmond Napoles, also commonly referred to as *Desmond is Amazing* (Kacala, 2018). He has over 150,000 followers on Instagram alone and currently describes himself as “a multi-awarded LGBTQ+ advocate, genderfluid editorial and runway model, motivational public speaker, performer, clothing designer, actor, singer, host, social media influencer and published author” (Napoles, 2023). He has had a strong public presence as a drag kid since at least the age of 8, however in 2018 at the age of 10 his influence increased exponentially as he was regularly featured in mainstream outlets “such as The New York Times, NBC News, Teen Vogue, OUT Magazine, among many others” (Napoles, 2023). It was interesting to learn that for kk, the child I interviewed, the one other drag kid he is aware of online is Desmond (Appendix A, Q4, 2023).

Desmond Napoles shares many similarities with environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who “has become a major spokesperson for environmental issues, mobilizing people worldwide to act against climate change” (Nässén & Rambaree, 2021, p. 1). Olesen claims that “Thunberg started out with no resources, a child of 15 with limited experience and a history of Asperger’s” (2022, p. 1325). This mirrors Napoles in many ways, although he started advocating at a younger age. Desmond also has Asperger’s and had few resources at the beginning of his advocacy journey (Greenfield, 2017). These two children had more challenges in advocating for their beliefs than the average adult, as “a child... is subject to restraining authority in ways that adults are not and, in addition, is limited in experience and resources” (Olesen, 2022, p. 1333). The two activists also have had many public comments made against them suggesting they are being controlled or manipulated by their parents or adults to ‘push’ a specific agenda or ideology, and that they do not genuinely believe or understand the messages they are promoting (Olesen, 2022; Justich, 2019). Napoles and Thunberg have both experienced threats to their safety, even death threats that are extremely graphic and disturbing (Assunção, 2022; Mathiesen, 2022). It is obvious that being a leader or at the centre of a movement can be very challenging, especially when the movement is polarizing and controversial.

There is a lot of value in analyzing the leader or most well-known figure in any social movement, especially when that figure is a child. How come they specifically are so well-known? Do messages from children resonate more with other children? Thunberg and Napoles also both used social media heavily, and continue to do so today, in order to spread awareness to the causes they believe in. As young people who grew up during the rise of technology and social media, their age in this case may provide an advantage as they understand how to use these platforms better than some adults. Greta has stated that the first thing she did was post on

Instagram and Twitter what she was doing (before journalists became involved), and Desmond's initial notoriety began at the age of 8, when a post of him wearing a pink tutu at the New York City Pride March went viral (Olesen, 2022; Justich, 2019). The two children both leveraged the power of social media to begin their advocacy work. They continue to post nearly daily content, detailing their events, initiatives and promoting articles and blog posts that feature them. However, beyond their actions there seems to be personal internal characteristics that have helped them reach a wide audience as self-described child advocates.

Nässén & Rambaree connect Greta Thunberg's leadership ability to a framework of moral authority, and attribute her success as a child advocate partly to her exhibiting the following five characteristics, "*sacrifice... trust* in the leader, whose vision encourages a willingness to follow; *courage* in standing firm in one's beliefs; *hope*, so the followers are empowered; and *belonging*, which creates a sense of being part of something larger" (2021, p. 2-3). In my opinion, Desmond Napoles has also exemplified these five characteristics throughout his career and continues to do so today. The specifics of how they demonstrate these qualities are beyond the scope of this paper, however the leadership quality of courage is particularly interesting. I propose that courage is not only found within the drag kid Desmond is Amazing, but in every drag kid, regardless of the number of followers they have or size of their audience.

Courage

In the CBC documentary *Drag Kids* 11-year-old Jason (Suzan Bee Anthony) describes attending church camp the day after experiencing his first Pride event. The nail polish he was wearing quickly attracted the attention of the camp counsellors, who forced him to sign a form saying that only men and women should be together in a romantic relationship (Wennberg, 2019, 11:50). The simple act of wearing nail polish resulted in him receiving negative criticism from

numerous adults who were in a position of power over him. He does not let experiences like this deter him, rather they strengthen his desire to continue his journey of self-expression. This is an act of courage.

Kk has struggled with other children in his class laughing at him and making him feel uncomfortable when wearing a dress or 'girls clothing'. He is slowly starting to express himself more, and recently has let his hair grow out and is still leaving it long despite the initial teasing and laughter. Kk hopes that he "will be brave enough to wear a skirt to school in the future" (Appendix A, Q5, 2023). He is continuing to be himself, despite never meeting another drag kid in person and almost all his peers not understanding his desire to be different and not a 'typical boy', he continues sharing his story with the world. This is an act of courage.

In one of the peak alt-right media moments of hysteria and conspiracies surrounding Desmond Napoles, there were hundreds of official child abuse allegations filed against the then 11-year-old. His mother, Wendy, stated in 2019 that child protective workers "would come at 3 in the morning even on school nights. They would visit Desmond at his school several times a week and pull him out of class" (Justich, 2019). They had an obligation to investigate every single report, even if countless visits had been made with no signs of abuse ever found. The trauma of these constant visits and many other negative incidents never made Desmond's desire to be an advocate wane. This is an act of courage.

Their audiences and contexts differ, yet these three children could all be viewed as activists. I would argue that even if these moments were never shared through a public platform, as all three were, even a young boy wearing a dress would be a form of activism as it differs so strongly from current societal norms in North America and will almost always eventually result in some sort of negative attention if worn in public spaces. Harris et al. (2010) argues that many

young people “are by and large not participants in emergent activist and protest cultures but opt for more ordinary ways to act on their political and social concerns” (p. 28). Many of the drag kids I researched do not consider themselves advocates, or have a desire to do advocacy work, yet there is a strong argument to be made that they are making social change through “individualized and everyday practices [that] shape society” (Harris et al., 2010, p. 28). It is likely that there are many drag kids who would despise being labelled an ‘activist’ and wish nothing more than to be accepted by their communities. Regardless of their motivations, their presence is influencing society and inspiring other children to express themselves and defy gender stereotypes.

It is important to consider and recognize the pros and cons of youth activism, and this was the focus of recent study by Connor et al. (2023). They found that “although youth generally report greater benefits from their activism than costs, the costs are significantly related to worse mental health, physical health, and flourishing...” (Connor et al., 2023, p. 127). There were also three major sources of ‘burnout’ identified, “backlash in response to their efforts; pressure to be the savior generation; and the slow progress of change” (Connor et al., 2023, p. 127). This relates to the debate surrounding participation versus protection. Are the risks of exposing a ‘drag kid’ to a worldwide audience worth the benefits. This is an individual decision and should be carefully considered by children in consultation with their families. The drag kids featured in this paper, even those as young as 7-years-old all seem to be coping with the dangers and risks in healthy ways.

The Colour Pink

As mentioned earlier, the drag kids researched for this paper do not believe that there is a necessary connection between certain sexualities and the label of ‘drag kid’. There are drag kids

who do not identify as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community or who have never even really considered their sexuality because of their young age. However, there are many logical parallels that can be made between issues impacting 2SLGBTQ+ kids and drag kids. A recent study by Bragg et al. (2018) found that schools overall are creating more opportunities in recent times to support gender and sexuality diversity. However, young people said that their “immediate social cultural worlds are constructed in such a way that gender binary choices are frequently inevitable, from school uniforms and toilets to sports cultures and friendship” (Bragg et al., 2018, p. 420). Drag kids exist outside of this binary space of expression, and therefore may experience some similar challenges to 2SLGBTQ+ youth. The children who are part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community *and* a drag kid would likely experience even greater challenges.

A recent study from New Zealand explored how a group in a school allowed 2SLGBTQ+ children to become advocates. The Rainbow Group was created by an adult school counsellor, and “provided a space for students to explore their own uncertainties, to express diverse identities and to engage in processes of legitimation” (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 494). The youth believe that the “meetings, actions, discussions and initiatives were moments of resistance in the school: times when a greater diversity of gender and sexual identities were visible” (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 494). It was interesting to see how an adult in the school initiated something that the students felt greatly benefited them, and it would be compelling to study if drag kids felt these types of groups are helpful to them.

There were also several studies where teachers and students worked together to bring more gender diverse spaces into the school environment, such as a school in Ontario that added all-gender bathrooms. The teacher and students “mobilized engagement by bridging activism with education” (Omercajic, 2022, p. 232). They asked if any of the youth would like to create

signs for the bathrooms as part of their art classes and had a very positive response (Omercajic, 2022). I personally remember working at a community centre years ago, and the newly renovated bathrooms were freshly painted with pink and blue walls. The boy's washroom was entirely blue and the girls entirely pink. There were probably thousands of children and adults who saw the colours of those bathroom walls each year. I wonder what kind of messages it would send if the colours had been reversed? Would a young boy feel more comfortable wearing his pink, sparkly shirt if it matched the colour of the boy's bathroom? It does seem like more advocacy initiatives are being created in public schools to support 2SLGBTQ+ children, and hopefully these initiatives can also help diminish the negative impacts of gender stereotypes and help drag kids feel more accepted and safe. I believe there is value in asking drag kids specifically what could be changed about school and public environments to make them feel more comfortable, and adults can hopefully create more opportunities for children to take the lead in implementing positive social changes.

Invisible Children

The process of researching 'drag kids' for the purposes of this paper led to some interesting findings regarding child advocacy and research in general. Maher & Earl (2021) conducted a study on age inequality and youth activism. The study found "that many young people have internalized deficit-model assumptions, affecting when and how they [participate]" (Maher & Earl, 2021, p. 215). The students they researched had internalized beliefs that they were not old enough or that some forms of activism were not age-appropriate for them to participate in (Maher & Earl, 2021). It is interesting that this study used only interviews from high school and college students. A major theme I found throughout the research process was a lack of children under the age of 12 involved in child advocacy studies. I feel that this

internalized deficit-model is also present in many adults, who may believe that children under 12 are not capable of achieving meaningful advocacy work. The lack of children under 12 in 2SLGBTQ+ studies may also suggest that many adults feel children are too young to discuss sexuality or gender identity at this age, or that their opinions and perspectives are not as relevant as older children. There are even adults who believe that children cannot attend a drag queen storytime, in which a drag queen reads a children's book in a public library (Bhargava, 2023). It is almost certain these same adults would believe it is completely inappropriate for a child to dress in drag themselves. What would happen if we all believed that very young children can create meaningful changes in the world?

It was surprising to discover that academic research on drag kids was non-existent. There was some research on children in relation to drag queen storytimes, but none that had any discussions on children who like to dress in drag. In order to explore this topic, I relied on documentaries, news articles, social media and an original interview that I was then able to connect to academic literature related to child advocacy. I feel there are many niches and sub-cultures that are unexplored in childhood research, especially relating to technology and social media. I imagine it is difficult to be the first to research something, as there is no prior research to reference. I do hope that drag kids can be part of future studies, as I feel their individual experiences are important and many are willing to share their stories. There are many themes and ideas that can be explored further in relation to drag kids.

Conclusion

I stated in the introduction of this paper that the concept of a drag kid seems pretty simple, but I have learned that their experiences and perspectives are definitely not. They have enabled me to learn a lot regarding child activism and social change, including what it means to

be the ‘poster child’ or most recognized leader of a specific cause. It takes a lot of courage to not follow accepted gender stereotypes, and choosing to wear certain outfits can be a form of activism all by itself. There are connections between 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy and drag kids, and schools are currently exploring how to work together with students to advocate for more inclusive and safe environments. There is a lack of participatory research involving children under the age of 12, especially in relation to controversial or niche topics. The courage of all the children I researched is inspiring, and I hope that every child—and adult—in our society finds the courage to be themselves, and to advocate when they see an opportunity for change.

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Appendix A

Original Interview



Reuben aka Ruby aka kk [@kkthequeen99]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved March 31, 2023, from <https://www.instagram.com/kkthequeen99/>

The following is an interview with kk and his mother I completed on March 31st, 2023. I have permission to use these responses and images for the purpose of this assignment. Reuben is a 7-year-old who lives in the United Kingdom. Kk uses the name Reuben at school and in many parts of his life, but also likes to go by kk, so I refer to him by that name throughout this paper. I greatly appreciate kk and Helen taking the time to share their story.

kk:

Q1. What do you like about drag?

They get to dress up as ladies. The clothes drag queens wear are colourful and beautiful, but not as beautiful as me.

Q2. What inspired you/when did you start dressing up?

My mum! When I saw her high heels I wanted some. Then I started to get into wearing dresses and make up from seeing drag queens on the tv eg Ru Paul drag race.

Q3. What is a drag kid in your own words?

A boy who wears sparkly and rainbow clothing, high heels and beautiful makeup.

Q4. Do you know any other drag kids, either online or in person?

I don't know any one in person but I follow Desmond is amazing on instagram.

Q5. What are some challenges you've had wearing dresses/skirts at school? (or even challenges in general - I've seen a few of your captions)

I have been worried about people laughing at me. I have started to wear my hair up for school because I'm growing it. They did laugh at first but then got use to me wearing it up in the end. Hopefully I will be brave enough to wear a skirt to school in the future.

Q6. What motivates you to share on Instagram?

So everyone can my beautifulness. To show other boys like me it's ok to be themselves.

Q7. What advice would you give to another child around your age who is interested in drag or wearing more 'opposite gender' style clothing?

Be yourself if anyone laughs at you just ignore them.

Q8. What do you want people to know about you?

That I'm just being my self and I love dressing in girl clothes.

kk's mother (Helen):**Q9. What are the risks/benefits of sharing kk's photos/story on Instagram in your opinion?**

Inappropriate responses. I have to delete a few inappropriate messages. Luckily I've managed to delete them pretty much straight away.

Just showing the world it's ok to let your child be themselves.

Q10. Do you think there are any misconceptions about drag kids?

That he's too young to decide what he want to wear and if he want to be a girl or not. I let kk decide if he wants to wear girl clothes or boy clothes, 90% of the time it's girl clothes.

Q11. What are your thoughts in regard to kk dressing up and/or wearing makeup?

I love the fact he's not afraid to express himself. He is most happiest when he's strutting around in high heels and a skirt. I just want him to be happy and not afraid of this world.

Q12. What do you want people to know about kk?

That this is an amazing 7 year old who wants to show the world his crazy colourfulness.