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## Queens and Queerness: Drag Performers and LGBTQ Advocacy Work in Japan

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Queens and Queerness: Drag Performers and LGBTQ Advocacy Work in Japan

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## Abstract

While Japanese queer subcultures is a common topic of discussion within academia, the Japanese drag queen is not. In fact, drag queens in general are often unrecognized in academic literature, let alone the Japanese drag queen. Drag queens consist of mostly gay men who present themselves as women while performing for gay and straight audiences alike. This piece begins the conversation regarding Japanese queens and their connections to queer advocacy work. By interviewing several drag queens from the Nagoya area, this paper illustrates their lived experiences as queer people and how they contribute to LGBTQ advocacy in Japan. In addition, I analyze the life of Furuhashi Teiji, a drag queen from 1980s Kyoto Japan. Drag queens ultimately use their unique position within queer spaces to provide visibility to the larger queer community. Furthermore, their ability to influence straight audiences, drive to create new queer spaces, and position within LGBTQ communities allows queens to have a larger impact on queer advocacy in Japan.

Soon after the first week of the fall semester in Nagoya I went to my first drag show with some friends. Everything about the concept of a drag show seems to lure one in with the promise of extravagant performances, fabulous outfits, and a party environment that accepts varying peoples, queer or otherwise. The Nagoya club provided just this; each drag queen performed a song in different ensembles while the majority queer audience danced the night away. One drag queen caught my attention after her especially dazzling performance as a modern version of a geisha. We quickly became friends over some sake and conversations regarding the LGBTQ communities in both America and Japan. She and the rest of the gay club struck a chord in me, due to how accepting they all were of my friends and I. I was moved by their rebellion against stereotypical gender performance while creating such a glamorous and safe space for other queer people to enjoy themselves.

While the club I visited for my first drag show was fairly small, I realized that the drag scene in Japan is not. In various cities there are queens who perform in different clubs or venues. Additionally, I was surprised that my drag queen friends did not limit themselves to only queer clubs or bars in their city. I would often stumble across them in straight clubs as well, either working as go-go dancers or serving drinks. This brought a question to mind: How do drag queens and their work allow for the increased visibility and gains in social acceptance of LGBTQ people? To address this question, I interviewed several prominent drag queens in the Nagoya area and consulted scholarship on gender-bending performance and LGBTQ issues in Japan. On the basis of this data, I argue that drag queens have helped the Japanese LGBTQ community gain more social acceptance.

In drag performance, mostly men experiment with their gender expression by performing as women. To do so, drag queens will often don wigs, wear feminine clothing,

and replicate the stereotypically female hourglass figure. At these shows, queens often dress themselves up in a way to imitate a certain celebrity, character, or theme.<sup>1</sup> Depending on the show one is attending, the queens will lip sync to songs while dancing on stage and will sometimes have a lip sync battle to see who can give the best performance to the audience. Other times, they will walk down a runway to show off their outfits that are often handmade. The costumes and makeup styles require a lot of skill to execute, therefore making drag performance not just about what the queens do on stage. In order to become a renowned queen, one must hone their skills in regard to fashion, makeup, and drag performance. Due to this, drag truly can be described as an art which takes creativity and talent to master.

It is crucial to first understand how the LGBTQ and drag communities can differ. During their interviews, the queens elaborate on how misconceptions regarding these communities ultimately construct a false image of who they and other LGBTQ people are. Therefore, it is essential to first gain a clear idea of how the two communities relate and differ so that misconceptions regarding the gay men who perform as drag queens can be minimized.

Drag performance can often be best seen as an extension of the LGBTQ community as it is a part of LGBTQ culture. As a performance art, technically anyone can perform in drag. In America, there are even “drag kings” or women who perform in men’s clothing.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there are various drag queens in America who are transgender women.<sup>3</sup> Even

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, the first Japanese drag show I went to featured a drag queen dressed up as a geisha.

<sup>2</sup> Decaro, Frank. “Drag Kings Are Ready to Rule.” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/style/drag-kings.html?referringSource=articleShare](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/style/drag-kings.html?referringSource=articleShare).

<sup>3</sup> Neveling, Andre. “8 Transgender Queens Who Starred on RuPaul’s Drag Race.” *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2020,

though there are people of different genders and sexualities in the world of drag, in both America and Japan gay men consist of the majority of drag performers.<sup>4</sup> All of the Japanese queens I interviewed are gay men. Therefore, outside of drag, the queens themselves are inherently connected to the LGBTQ community. This allows for the lack of tension between the two communities, since while not all gay men may relate to being a drag queen, the vast majority of drag queens can relate to being a gay man.

As the connection between the drag and LGBTQ communities is often misinterpreted by Japanese society in varying ways, distinguishing how these two communities are related yet different is particularly important to the drag queens who were interviewed. One queen Rafa describes how crossdressers and other LGBTQ individuals are conflated, stating that “It is thought by straight Japanese people that in order to work as *onee talento* (female talent) on television, gay men turn themselves into women. This is a result of the misconception that gay men want to turn into women...” Here Rafa illustrates how many Japanese people easily misinterpret drag queens and *onee talento* as transgender women.<sup>5</sup> While it is not impossible for a transgender woman to do drag, it is uncommon in Japan in comparison to the large number of gay men who perform in drag. Therefore, it is important to differentiate transgender women from drag queens, and acknowledge that one’s clothing or makeup does not necessarily correlate to gender identity.

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[www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3098000/8-transgender-queens-rupauls-drag-race-philippines-jiggly](http://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3098000/8-transgender-queens-rupauls-drag-race-philippines-jiggly).

<sup>4</sup> Rupp, Leila J., et al. “Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes.” *Sexualities*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2010, pp. 275–94.

<sup>5</sup> *Onee talento* refers to a group of men who dress up in stereotypically female clothing on television where they usually have more flamboyant personalities. Instead of performing like drag queens, they instead conduct discussions with other television personalities.

Additionally, it is important not to assume that any man wearing makeup is a drag queen. The drag queens stated that this assumption is rampant among straight cisgender people. However, there are many gay men who use makeup on a daily basis in Japan. This is illustrated by men like Kodo Nishimura, a gay Buddhist monk who has made waves in the cosmetics world with his advanced skills and seemingly contradictory lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> While Mr. Nishimura does love makeup, he does not perform for audiences or conduct shows, making him not a drag queen. He illustrates how gay men are able to experiment with makeup without being a part of the drag queen community.

Examples like these show how the general Japanese population can easily confuse the drag community with other groups within the larger LGBTQ community. Ultimately, if an individual is part of the drag community, they must perform for other people. It is critical to remember that the two communities relate yet still have different experiences, sexualities, and gender identities.

### **Cross-dressing in Japanese Performance**

Even though the art of drag has not been a part of Japanese culture for very long, the concept of crossdressing in performance art certainly has. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, kabuki has continued to captivate audiences with actors who play as both men and women. While kabuki and drag are two different art forms, kabuki is able to illustrate Japan's history of toying with one's gender expression through performance art. Since these two performance arts might revolve around similar discussions of gender, it is crucial to consider what

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<sup>6</sup> Green, Lillian. "The Monk In Mascara: The Gender Fluid Monk Who Divides His Time Between Makeup Artistry and a Tokyo Monastery." *Tokyo Weekender*, July 14, 2020, [www.tokyoweekender.com/2020/06/kodo-nishimura-monk-in-mascara/](http://www.tokyoweekender.com/2020/06/kodo-nishimura-monk-in-mascara/).

academics in the field of East Asian Studies have to say in regards to kabuki and gender expression. Through doing this, one can assess the academic discussions surrounding Japanese cross-dressing performance arts and deepen them further with the topic of drag.

While drag is an art discussed very little among East Asian Studies academics, kabuki and gender performance is an extremely popular topic. William Vollmann, a renowned essayist, contributes to the discussion of gender expression in kabuki art through his work *Kissing the Mask*.<sup>7</sup> In addition, I will focus on a chapter of *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies* by Katherine Mezur, a professor at the University of California who focuses on performance arts and gender studies within the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>8</sup> In both of these works, the authors consider how gender dynamics play into the art of kabuki, which further deepens the academic conversations surrounding performance arts which involve cross-dressing.

After reading these two works, it is clear in that their research questions are similar while their methodologies and arguments are drastically different. Vollmann and Mezur each asks how onnagata, or the act of a kabuki actor dressing and acting as a woman, represents femininity. Yet, after this point, the methodologies and arguments of the authors differ greatly. Vollmann's main methodology is doing field work, in which he asks kabuki actors themselves about the gender dynamics associated with their performances. Mezur's methodologies instead consist of her conducting historical analysis in addition to examining the aesthetics of onnagata in kabuki performance. As for their arguments, Vollmann

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<sup>7</sup> Vollmann, William T. *Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement, and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater : with Some Thoughts on Muses (especially Helga Testorf), Transgender Women, Kabuki Goddesses, Porn Queens, Poets, Housewives, Makeup Artists, Geishas, Valkyries, and Venus Figurines*. Ecco, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Mezur, Katherine. "Transforming Genders: Performing the Kabuki Paradigm of Female-Likeness, Bodies Beneath, and Beautiful Boys." *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies*, Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 1–15.

ultimately argues that onnagata constructs the “essense of femininity” and can represent a gender more female than a real woman. Mezur rebuts this claim, and argues that the onnagata is instead a presentation of a “male fantasy of the female likeness”. Through their works, Vollmann and Mezur illuminate the debate among the topic of gender performance in kabuki.

While the methodologies and arguments of Vollmann and Mezur may differ, these works both acknowledge similar key points regarding the gender dynamics in kabuki. Both recognize the concept that those who engage in onnagata do not want to look exactly like “real” woman, and that however “male” a person can be, they can still be a woman. In addition, the authors discuss how the space between a male and a female that onnagata exists in encourages the idea of a gender spectrum. This concept is particularly important as it implies the existence of the gender spectrum in Japan before the introduction of drag.

To understand better how drag queens have affected the lives and perceptions of other Japanese queer people, I interviewed seven drag queens who perform in the Nagoya area after making contact with them over social media. The interview consisted of fifteen questions relating to being a drag queen and LGBTQ culture in Japan. Due to the drastic twelve-hour time difference between the United States and Japan, the drag queens and I found it best to conduct the interviews through Instagram messaging. Ultimately, this interview method allowed the drag queens to answer the questions at their own convenience while giving me time to ask questions as needed. Through conducting these interviews, I was able to learn more about the lived experiences of drag queens and their perceptions of Japanese queer culture.

By talking with various Japanese drag queens, I learned how they provide visibility to their community and encourage the acceptance of other queer people. These interviews allow

for a deeper understanding of the Japanese drag community and how queens work to advocate for the larger LGBTQ community, something which has not been previously discussed in East Asian or Queer Studies academia.

### **Experimenting with Gender in Japanese Performance**

In his younger years, Miss Banana said he always had a desire to “transform”, similar to that of Sailor Moon and the popular children’s anime character Doremi.<sup>9</sup> These animated characters are extremely feminine in nature, and “transform” in every episode of their shows from wearing everyday women’s clothing to extremely girly dresses that are adorned with bows, ribbons, and the like. He expressed how he was always a more feminine child, and that he sees drag as a way to experience the more feminine aspects of his identity on a regular basis. This aspect of my interview with Miss Banana is crucial as it conveys that drag is not only used to explore one’s identity, but also used to live in one’s more feminine form. Here, Miss Banana and other queens like him are able to consistently interact with more feminine or gender fluid aspects of their identities.

Yet, exploring and experiencing different aspects of one’s identity is not something that only drag queens experience. Experimenting with one’s gender identity is common among the large majority of Japanese LGBTQ people. Outside of drag queens, we can see instances where transgender men have experimented with their identities. For example, the Shinjuku Boys, a group of transgender men who entertain cis-female audiences at host clubs, see themselves as men yet fully accept their female bodies and aspects of their personalities

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<sup>9</sup> Note that I will likely alternate the pronouns I use when discussing the queens. While many American queens have preferred pronouns, Japanese queens largely do not as gendered language does not appear in Japanese very often.

that are more “feminine” in nature.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Japanese lesbians also embrace stereotypically masculine aspects of their identities. One Japanese YouTuber Honey is a lesbian and frequently discusses her sexuality and experiences grappling with gender identity in her videos. She expresses how Japanese lesbians also play with gender expression conveying that she dresses more masculine on purpose and that she has had moments where she has wanted to be a man before.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, while drag is one way gay men often experiment with their gender identity, many also cross-dress as well.<sup>12</sup><sup>13</sup> These instances of people playing with gender emphasize that this is a common experience among the LGBTQ community. While not every individual may experiment with gender expression, this experience transcends a person’s sexuality or identity, and proves to be a common occurrence within the LGBTQ community. Experimenting with gender expression is an experience that is shared among all groups of LGBTQ people and therefore unites the larger community.

In addition, experimenting with gender expression can also be seen among young people in Japan. The all-female Takarazuka Performance School provides its students with the choice of whether they want to perform as a male or female onstage.<sup>14</sup> Due to this, there are many women who appear extremely masculine on stage as they have the autonomy to

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, Jano. *Shinjuku Boys*. Kanopy, 1995, <https://dickinson.kanopy.com/video/shinjuku-boys>.

<sup>11</sup> “Fifty Candid Questions with Honey.” Youtube, uploaded by Hani-Hani-ch, February 18, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> This can be seen in the work of *onee talento* like Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe, who were formally drag queens but now act as television personalities who participate in Japanese talk shows.

<sup>13</sup> Fifield, Anna, and Yuki Oda. “It’s Fine to Be Gay on Japanese TV - If You’re Outlandish and Outrageous.” *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Longinotto, Kim. *Dream Girls*. Dailymotion, 1993, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7scayo>.

express their gender differently. In addition, Takarazuka's performances are often homoromantic in nature and push the audience to question whether or not the actresses are actually straight and cisgender. Therefore, while many of the actresses may not be LGBTQ, the ways in which they play with gender expression onstage still encourages the audience to think about queerness, an affect that is similar to that of the work of drag queens.

### **Drag Queens and LGBTQ Advocacy**

Drag queens are sure that they provide visibility for the larger LGBTQ community. One of the reasons they mentioned as to why drag queens are able to do this was due to the “inherent nature of drag performance”. Miss Labiana stated that though standing out in their performances, they can communicate to other straight individuals that there are other sexual and gender identities that exist. By performing in a way that experiments with gender expression, drag queens are able to reflect the values of the larger LGBTQ community and garner awareness for other sexualities and genders.

Teiji Furuhashi, a Kyoto based drag queen who performed in the 1980s, was the first drag queen to advocate for LGBTQ issues. Due to the fact that Furuhashi himself was able to encourage positive change for gay people, his life can illustrate the way drag queens can provide visibility for the larger community.<sup>15</sup>

Furuhashi Teiji was a man well-known in the Japanese art scene of the 1980s. He attended the Kyoto University of Arts in 1984 and became a media artist, a person who experiments with visual images, music and performance to create different interactive

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<sup>15</sup> Kanako, Takeda. “Furuhashi Teiji no [Geijyutsu] kan to Doraagu • Kuin toshite no katsudou.” *Buyou gaku*, 2009, [https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/buyougaku/2009/32/2009\\_25/\\_article/-char/ja](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/buyougaku/2009/32/2009_25/_article/-char/ja).

exhibitions. With the founding of his artists' collective called "Dumb Type" he gained national recognition for his work and even curated an exhibit in the famous Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) in New York City. His expertise in the field of art made him a recognizable name to many in 1980's Japan. Unbeknownst to many, Furuhashi also participated in drag. After being inspired by some of the drag queens in New York, he began participating in Kyoto's drag scene all the while bringing more attention to it. Furuhashi stressed that drag was no different than any other art form and that people should use it to explore different modes of artistic and gender expression.

Sadly, Furuhashi was diagnosed with HIV in October of 1992. Before his passing in 1995 however, he chose to bring attention to the Japanese HIV/AIDS Crisis. In a letter to a friend sent before his death, Furuhashi emphasized his "new self" which arose from being diagnosed. Furthermore, he conveyed how this "new self" would continue his art through planning exhibitions for after his death while also advocating for the HIV/AIDS Crisis. His letter was relayed to varying members of the gay and drag communities in Kyoto and spurred various activities to combat the crisis in Kyoto. At the 2007 Kyoto City AIDS Open Lecture on Sexually Transmitted Diseases, experts claimed that Furuhashi's letter encouraged a crucial turning point in regard to the HIV/AIDS Crisis in Kyoto.

Yet, even after his passing, the legacy and influence of Furuhashi continued on through his performance group Dumb Type. In the 1990s, the group resumed their "DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER" drag parties and actively supported the APP (AIDS Poster Project) which carried out HIV/AIDS education in the Kyoto area.<sup>16</sup> The Mori Art Museum

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<sup>16</sup> Mori Art Museum. "Chronicle Kyoto 1990s - Diamonds Are Forever, Art-Scape, And I Dance with Somebody." Mori Art Museum. <https://www.mori.art.museum/en/exhibitions/mamresearch006/>.

of Kyoto claimed that Dumb Type united art, activism and club cultures as to encourage community between drag queens and the larger gay community. Through the life and legacy of Furuhashi Teiji, drag performance in Kyoto created spaces for gay communities to flourish and became closely aligned with LGBTQ activism. Furuhashi serves as a prime example of a drag queen in Japanese history who fought used his platform to advocate and provide visibility to larger queer communities.

### **The Structure of Drag Performance and its Benefits for Visibility**

The hierarchy within the world of drag also expands visibility of the larger LGBTQ community in Japan. Within the world of drag performance in Japan, not all queens are immediately able to perform in work environments intended for LGBTQ people. Many queens who do not have a lot of experience must first work in environments that are mostly meant for straight people. Meanwhile, drag queens who have performed drag for years and have a recognizable name within their city are often the ones who are invited to perform in LGBTQ spaces. This in turn creates a kind of work hierarchy among drag performers in which one must prove themselves to the owners of queer spaces first in order to work for them. The hierarchy requires some queens to work in straight spaces which allows for straight people to become exposed to drag in a way they may have not experienced before. This is somewhat ironic as the less experienced queens ultimately do more in terms of spreading awareness of the LGBTQ community. In order to illustrate how this hierarchy can benefit drag queens and the larger Japanese LGBTQ community, it is crucial to examine the experiences of a young drag queen named Rafa.

After being inspired by how much confidence drag queens have in themselves, Rafa decided to become a drag queen in June of 2019, making him one of the younger queens in his city of Nagoya. With his limited experience in drag performance, Rafa was limited to performing in mostly straight clubs and bars in order to develop his name and image. He describes his work stating that “I mainly perform shows and act as a gogo girl at clubs on the weekends. Sometimes my work looks more like that of a ‘cabaret’ club, where I drink alcohol and talk to customers.” He further conveys that in his cabaret club work, he wanted his straight customers to know that drag queens are not just to be seen as interesting, but as an art that “expresses the prejudices of women and men and which shows that distortions of masculinity and femininity exist within Japanese society.” In other words, Rafa wanted other people to understand what drag performance is and how it can express that various gender expressions exist within Japanese society through his work interacting and initiating dialogue with straight people. Rafa’s experiences in straight club environments has clearly illustrated the ability of less experienced drag queens to act as queer advocates to the larger straight cisgender<sup>17</sup> community.

The work of another drag queen, Miss Bitchorina, also supports the concept of the hierarchy within drag and illustrates its benefits for queer people. Miss Bitchorina is a less experienced drag queen as she became a queen in June of 2018. She recalls in her interview how she originally performed as a go-go girl in straight clubs but is now working in public relations positions for cosmetic brands. Her new experiences working for brands is largely due to how she made a name for herself through her years of working as a drag queen in straight club environments. In her interview, Miss Bitchorina conveyed that even her work as

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<sup>17</sup> Cisgender refers to one’s personal gender identity aligning with that of their birth sex.

a go-go girl has been able to bring attention to LGBTQ issues as she often discussed her work as a drag queen with audience members. The work of Miss Bitchorina serves as another example of how less experienced drag queens can spread awareness and provide visibility to the larger LGBTQ community in Japan.

It is important to note that this effect over the straight cisgender community is not something that other more popular queens can easily do in the present. While experienced drag queens may have had this effect when they began their work, they currently do not. Since the more experienced queens are performing in spaces filled with LGBTQ individuals who are aware of different ways to approach gender expression, they have less opportunities to spread awareness of the LGBTQ community to straight cisgender people. However, less experienced drag queens like Rafa and Miss Bitchorina are, for the most part, interacting with only straight individuals, making it easier for them to spread awareness of what drag is and its connections to the larger LGBTQ community. Due to this, the work of individuals like Rafa and Miss Bitchorina are able to influence the more general Japanese public and improve the image of drag queens and the LGBTQ community.

### **Drag Queens Making Queer Spaces: On and Offline**

While some queens have created new queer spaces in the real world, others took to the internet and social media. A prime example of a drag queen who creates new spaces for LGBTQ people on and offline is through the queen Rafa's work. As Rafa is still in college, he is in a unique position where he can more easily affect a largely straight cisgender student body. While Rafa has been particularly vocal about LGBTQ issues on his personal Instagram, he took his advocacy a step further when he created Nanzan University's

Sexuality Club.<sup>18</sup> The club not only meets in person and hosts events at the college, but also maintains its own Instagram to advertise their activities. While the club provides a space for queer individuals at Nanzan to congregate, it also posts various infographics on their Instagram that allows straight cisgender students at Nanzan to familiarize themselves with queer terminology and days of remembrance.<sup>19</sup> Due to this, Rafa has created a safe space for LGBTQ individuals both off and online, while also spreading awareness of queer issues and concepts to straight people. During his time at Nanzan University, Rafa has been able to take advantage of his position within the student body to create a dynamic space for LGBTQ people. Through his work, he has undoubtedly supported and advocated for the greater LGBTQ community.

Another queen in the Nagoya area who cultivates queer spaces on and offline is Miss Lyra.<sup>20</sup> While her website “Lyra Company” mostly describes her work and schedule as a drag queen, it also serves as a blog where she frequently publishes posts in regard to LGBTQ culture. Miss Lyra has even written blog posts to advertise Nagoya’s Pride Parades of previous years.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, those who read her blog posts are able to comment and participate in conversations regarding LGBTQ issues. Due to this, not only has Miss Lyra been able to spread awareness of queer events and culture, but she has also been able to cultivate queer spaces online and in person through Nagoya’s Pride Parades. In addition to creating queer spaces online and supporting those in real life, Miss Lyra’s work illustrates the

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<sup>18</sup> Rafa. “Instagram Biography.” *Instagram*, [https://www.instagram.com/rafa\\_\\_555/](https://www.instagram.com/rafa__555/).

<sup>19</sup> Nanzan Sexuality Club. “Discussion Corner.” *Instagram*, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CH71Z\\_v19aF/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CH71Z_v19aF/).

<sup>20</sup> I communicated with Miss Lyra in regards to conducting an interview but ultimately could not do so.

<sup>21</sup> Lyra. “Decision to Hold Nagoya Pride 2020 Online.” *Lyra Company*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.lyra-dragqueen.com/posts/8566596/>.

position drag queens have within the LGBTQ community. During Nagoya's Rainbow Pride Parade of 2019, Miss Lyra herself carried the banner at the front of the parade, leading participants through Nagoya's downtown area.<sup>2223</sup> In addition, she also served as a figurehead of the event, as various people and media outlets took pictures with her. The pictures taken from the event show how Miss Lyra was the only individual at the event who was treated in this regard and who acted as a promoter of Nagoya's Pride Parade. The Nagoya Rainbow Pride Parade illustrates the higher position Miss Lyra and other drag queens hold within the LGBTQ community due to their flamboyant nature and how they can serve as queer activists.

In Furuhashi Teiji's years, the internet was not as useful of a tool in connecting communities that are smaller in nature. Therefore, most queer spaces existed in the physical world and were limited in quantity. However, in contemporary Japan, queer individuals are able to enjoy the internet and social media, which both exposes more straight people to LGBTQ communities while also allowing queer people to gather virtually and interact with other LGBTQ people. Nagoya drag queen Miss Aqua conveys that "Because of the presence of drag queens on the internet, TV, and social networking platforms, we are gradually becoming more recognized." Not only can this be understood through Rafa's Sexuality Club Instagram account and Miss Lyra's LGBTQ blog, drag queens can also be seen creating queer spaces online through social networking apps like Twitter. Bar Piece, a Nagoya-based gay bar which is made up of drag queens, is extremely active and promotes drag

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to Figure 1 in the appendix.

<sup>23</sup> Lyra. "LGBT and the Effect of the Coronavirus." *Lyra Company*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.lyra-dragqueen.com/posts/8246417/>.

performances and interacts with other queens on a daily basis.<sup>24</sup> As an example, the account recently published a tweet advertising a Pride Parade by Nagoya's canal.<sup>25</sup> Various queens follow the account and are seen interacting with the tweet and conducting conversations around it. Here Bar Piece and the accounts of drag queens convey the drag community and queer dialogue that exists on Twitter. Additionally, as established earlier, drag performance reflects the values of the larger LGBTQ community. Through their presence online, drag queens can provide visibility not only for themselves but for other LGBTQ peoples. Since the internet allows drag queens to interact with each another and other LGBTQ people, it is significantly easier for them to spread awareness of LGBTQ culture and issues than if queer spaces only existed in the physical world. Ultimately, the world of social media expands the influence drag queens have as advocates of the LGBTQ community while allowing them to spread awareness of queer people.

### ***Onee Talento* and its Mixed Effects on Drag Queens and Transgender Individuals**

*Onee talento*, as stated previously, is a kind of television personality that consists of gay men presenting as female hosts. They dress and wear makeup in a way that a cisgender woman would, and participate on talk shows rather than perform on a stage like drag queens.<sup>26</sup> Within this category of television personalities, celebrities Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe are well known as *onee talento*. While *onee talento* and drag performance

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<sup>24</sup> @bar\_piece. Twitter, May 2018, [https://twitter.com/bar\\_piece](https://twitter.com/bar_piece).

<sup>25</sup> @bar\_piece. “名古屋堀川沿いでプライドパレード！！【2021年4月4日開催】(Pride Parade Alongside the Nagoya Canal! Held on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2021) .” March 23, 2021, [https://twitter.com/bar\\_piece/status/1374327198627233792](https://twitter.com/bar_piece/status/1374327198627233792).

<sup>26</sup> Refer to Figure 2 and 3 in the appendix to see how *onee talento* and drag queens present themselves differently.

are different forms of entertainment, both individuals have ties to the drag community as they both performed as queens prior to being television personalities.<sup>27</sup> It is also important to note that their positions as *onee talento* enable them to influence not only television, but also mass media. Due to this, both Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe have a unique influence over not only how *onee talento* is perceived, but also how drag queens and LGBTQ people are viewed by the straight cisgender people who watch television.

Even though Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe are not actively working as drag queens, they help to improve the image of drag queens and the larger LGBTQ community. Tokyo-based drag queen Miss Pina Nina expresses that “I certainly think that one of the reasons straight people are deepening their understanding of the LGBTQ community is because of the work of cross-dressers. Former drag queens like Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe who work in television as *onee talento* come to mind.” The queens ultimately agree that *onee talento* exposes straight cisgender audiences to the concept of playing with one’s gender expression, a common theme in *onee talento*, drag, and the larger LGBTQ community. Because of *onee talento*, straight cisgender audiences become used to seeing people play with their gender expression in Japanese society, something which helps improve the perception of drag queens as well as transgender individuals. Therefore, while Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe are not currently working as drag queens, their positions within television spread awareness and improve the images of the crossdressing, drag, and larger LGBTQ communities.

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<sup>27</sup> Shinya, Yumi. “Gendai no Shouzou: Doraagu Kuin, Kashuu, Talento, Mitz Mangrove.” *Aera*, December 9, 2019, 52-57.

Yet, the work of Mitz Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe as *onee talento* also complicates the image of drag queens. Through their work on television, they can send the wrong image to straight cisgender people that *onee talento* and drag queens do the same kind of work. Instead of familiarizing themselves with the backgrounds of these individuals and their previous experiences as drag queens, many straight cisgender people assume that their current television work correlates to that of drag queens. The drag queen Miss Bitchorina elaborates on this, stating that “The majority of Japanese people believe that drag queens are only comedians who are dressed as women, however this is the work of *onee talento*. This is because *onee talento* are still largely associated with drag queens even though that is not their current occupation.” Therefore, while the work of *onee talento* on television can provide visibility to the crossdressing, drag, and LGBTQ communities, their presence can also make the impression that these communities are one in the same.

The work of *onee talento* and how it affects the drag and LGBTQ communities is fairly complicated in nature. While *onee talento* and drag are two different occupations, many straight cisgender people assume that they are the same as the more popular individuals within *onee talento* were previously drag queens. However, after interviewing the drag queens, it is apparent that these former drag queens turned television personalities ultimately do improve the images of drag queens and the LGBTQ community. This is due to the way *onee talento* play with gender expression in front of their massive straight cisgender audiences across Japan and in turn influence Japanese mass media. As experimenting with one’s gender expression becomes more normalized and accepted, the perceptions of drag queens and LGBTQ people are able to improve. Due to this, *onee talento* like Mitz

Mangrove and Matsuko Deluxe illuminate how even former drag queens help provide visibility and can improve the images of drag queens and LGBTQ individuals.

### **Impact of Queens' Queer Advocacy**

Arguably, drag queens advocate for the greater LGBTQ community. However, does their work actually positively affect their communities? This question cannot be adequately answered without gaining more information from the larger straight, cisgender Japanese community, which was out of the scope of my research. Yet, the interview responses that I received from the drag queens suggest that their work has had a positive effect of some kind onto the larger Japanese LGBTQ community. It is crucial to analyze how they have had an effect onto ours as to understand their role as queer advocates in Japan.

Even so, there is evidence that points to the advocacy of drag queens having a positive effect on the lives of LGBTQ people in Japan. As described in previous sections, drag queens are providing awareness for LGBTQ people in various ways. One example can be seen in the life of Furuhashi Teiji, who, as mentioned earlier, was able to spur an increase in the education and awareness of HIV/AIDS in the Kyoto area due to his work. Without the work of Teiji, the AIDS crisis could have taken the lives of more queer people in Kyoto. In addition, drag queens are consistently providing awareness for LGBTQ peoples as well as creating spaces for them to discuss queer issues. Drag queens will often create spaces online to educate others in regard to LGBTQ culture while also conducting discussions on queer issues. In addition, drag queens even go so far as to create physical spaces meant for queer people. Rafa the Nagoya drag queen did this when he created a LGBTQ club on their college campus that provide a physical space for queer people to support one another and conduct discussions on queer issues. In addition, drag queens also act as LGBTQ advocates when

they interact with straight people. For example, queens will often spread awareness of queer culture to straight people that they interact with in night clubs that they perform in.

Furthermore, the position drag queens hold in Pride parades illustrates their ability to also represent and advocate for the LGBTQ community. These actions clearly illustrate the queer advocacy work that Japanese drag queens conduct.

The drag queens who I interviewed affirm that this advocacy work has had a positive impact on the larger LGBTQ community. Miss Banana, a Nagoya based drag queen and queer activist claims that she and other LGBTQ people she knows used to be harassed on the street for looking like a queer individual. Yet, now she states that she deals less with harassment, and is often asked for a picture instead. Even though this is opinion of only one drag queen, it can illustrate the small changes that are occurring in communities across Japan. Without the work of individual drag queens in different Japanese cities and communities, LGBTQ people would not be able to feel the small yet positive effects of queer advocacy. Furthermore, the fact that Japanese people are willing to take pictures with drag queens and accept their flamboyant identities conveys that Japanese people are also coming to accept other LGBTQ individuals, as they can more easily pass as straight cisgender people.

Through this evidence, it is evident that drag queens have actively advocated for and supported other LGBTQ people. The lived experiences of the drag queens I interviewed even points to their advocacy positively effecting the perceptions of LGBTQ people in general. Yet, until the opinions of straight cisgender Japanese people are investigated, whether or not drag queens have effected their perceptions of queer people will remain unclear. Therefore, it is clear that Japanese drag queens clearly act to change the general perceptions of queer people for the better.

## Conclusion

My intent for conducting this research has been fairly simple: begin the conversation regarding Japanese drag and illustrate its deep-rooted connections to the larger LGBTQ community as it has not been discussed in Western or Japanese academia. However, since my evidence has only illustrated how drag queens act as queer advocates and work to help improve the lives of other LGBTQ people, there will naturally be topics in which I did not have the time or interest to cover in my work.

Within the topic of Japanese drag, there are many avenues other academics could take to conduct more research. The first of many additional topics of research within drag include investigating Japanese straight cisgender peoples' perceptions of drag queens and their relation to the larger LGBTQ community. Investigating the opinions of the straight cisgender audience would illuminate how drag queens and their advocacy work is perceived in Japanese society. Ultimately, this would provide a better understanding of the larger effects of drag queens' advocacy work. Secondly, I would encourage other scholars to consider the way drag performance fits into Japanese gender politics. Especially since there have been other instances in Japanese history where individuals have performed while presenting as the gender opposite to the one that they were assigned at birth. These examples of cross-dressing performance include traditional kabuki theater and the Takarazuka performance school. Furthermore, these examples encouraged larger discussions of gender in Japanese society, a phenomenon that drag performance may also have accomplished. This avenue for further research could illuminate how gender expression manifests in performance and the discussions that arise in Japanese society because of them. Lastly, it would be intriguing to see if there are any nuances between drag communities in Japan. As I largely focused on drag

queens from the city of Nagoya, I did not have the time to investigate other drag communities in other Japanese cities. Yet, investigating other drag communities could provide a more comprehensive image of how Japanese queens approach their performance and advocacy work. Going forward, I believe that academics should consider these topics in order to continue the meaningful research of drag queens and their position in Japanese society and culture.

I have argued that Japanese drag queens both identify with and advocate for the LGBTQ community in Japan. By using their social position in the LGBTQ community at queer events, creating physical and online spaces for queer discussion, and encouraging discussions related to LGBTQ with straight people, Japanese drag queens spread awareness of LGBTQ culture. Recognizing the advocacy work that Japanese drag queens conduct, raises the question of how queer communities in other countries interact with one another. Perhaps there is an emerging queer culture that surpasses international boundaries? While assessing how other queer communities interact and support one another may be a daunting task, it is essential in order to gain a better understanding of how queer individuals have survived and developed subcultures in their own respective regions.

Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1.



Figure 2. *Onee Talento*



Figure 3. Drag Queens



Appendix B: Interviewees

1. Rafa, a Brazilian Japanese drag queen based in Nagoya (Insta: @rafa\_555)
2. Miss Aqua, a drag queen based in Nagoya (Instagram: @aquadq)
3. Miss Labianna, a Tokyo based drag queen (Instagram: @labiannajoroe)
4. Miss Banana, a Nagoya based drag queen and LGBTQ activist who is affiliated with the gay bar Queen Diamond (Instagram: @bananagesomi)
5. Miss Pina Nina, a Tokyo based drag queen (Instagram: pina\_nina\_)
6. Miss Bitchorina, an Osaka based drag queen (Instagram: bitchorina)
7. Miss Akiko Kardashian, an Osaka based drag queen (Instagram: akk\_kardash)

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