

Reborn in Heels: Integrating Filipino Contemporary Drag through a Digital Graphic Novel

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Abstract

This paper discusses ideas and analyses of artistic ways/channels of doing the art of drag through cross-dressing and gender impersonation, and how local mainstream media and general masses perceive the art form through Queer theory. In addition, it provides an overview of comic art as a medium and how its status in the local scene shows the purpose behind using such an art form to illustrate nuances of another niche culture/art form like drag. The project uses the potential of comics in presenting visually active topics, with attention to the mentioned art form seen through the lens of Filipino culture. Moreover, this project will utilize digital software such as Adobe Photoshop to fully illustrate and “give life” to the local industries of the art forms mentioned.

Keywords: drag, Filipino culture, Filipino *komiks*, queer, LGBTQ+ community, gender norms, self-expression

Introduction

Although the elements of drag have been scattered around the country’s history and media, its local scene/industry has only bloomed in the last few years. This art form which explores the concepts of playing with gender and traditional concepts surrounding the gender binary is popular among individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, as this becomes their outlet to express their innate femininity or masculinity in ways that could be intimidating to do so outside the art form as they live in a place where heteronormativity is ideal. The conservative and religious culture of the Philippines is mostly opposed to queerness and concepts linked to homosexuality which gets reflected in the local mainstream media. As the LGBTQ+ community and movement gain more exposure in media, the treatment of personalities and characters who belong to that group is still based on stereotypes and the form of acceptance for them appears to be skin-deep (De Leon & Jintalan, 2018), that they will only be tolerated if they fulfill the expectations that the heteronormative society has from them. The most common expectations about the community shown in mainstream media are either that they stand as comic relief, or they end up becoming the object of derision.

Amidst the issues that LGBTQ+ individuals face in their surroundings, the ongoing popularity of Western TV shows/movies about drag such as RuPaul's Drag Race provided a more diverse, accurate, and nuanced representation of drag queens. The celebration of the art form's culture in the West reached international audiences, including Filipinos (Tangcay, 2022). As a viewer, the drag 'phenomenon' made me learn and put aside deliberate and/or unconscious prejudices towards LGBTQ+ identities and expressions rooted in a conservative upbringing.

On the other hand, I aim to illustrate this in an art form that is evident in Filipino art history and the country's pop culture— graphic novels in the style of the early Pinoy Komiks that displayed notable Pinoy characters that feature Filipino values and culture, particularly superheroes such as “Darna”, “Captain Barbell”, “Lastikman”, and other characters that are usually found in local newspapers/broadsheets and magazines. Graphic novels are defined in diverse varieties, as it is another art form that comes in different formats/styles. Still, almost all works that belong to this art have the same idea that they contain a sequence of illustrations that visually tell the story with a written script, i.e., dialogues. According to Murray (2011), the term “graphic novel” was conceived due to the stigma around the idea of adults reading “comics” that were deemed to be for children and a way to advertise the art form as a reading material that branches out from the mainly humorous/comedic themes of comics in general. Albeit its origins are scattered in different ancient cultures, this art form became more popular in the 21st century due to accessibility and demand which opened more interpretations of the art form that go beyond the traditional comics format, and the integration of other art practices such as contemporary art and graphic design. The art form's definition has become less specific, and more capable of welcoming creative freedom.

As an artist who is aware of the importance of welcoming new ideas and understanding different walks of life, I noticed how versatile drag can be by how it helped audiences become aware that its history is heavily associated with political issues; and this art form which that can also resonate with people as it opens a discussion for self-esteem and confidence, eventually turning stories of drag artists as a source of comfort for viewers. It is a topic that can be interpreted in another art form such as graphic novels due to it being a flexible visual art form, and this art form has made its own mark in Filipino culture, which may help in making it familiar and accessible to Filipino audiences.

Believing in the significance of progress encourages me to promote the discourse about this art form, its philosophy, and how it can be explored more in our country as something that is beyond the monotonous representation and ideas about those who practice drag. Through social realism with facets under a drama genre, the art of drag can be displayed in a creative output that focuses on gender as an artistic performance and its capacity to display various issues that derive from social constructs from elements of the art form that deviate from them.

This paper emphasizes that making a digital graphic novel can be used to depict stories and boost awareness/exposure for niche cultures, such as the art of drag and its scene in the Philippines.

The creative output has Queer and Feminist theory as its theoretical framework due to the output's focus on discussing gender binary and other forms of SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression) which aids in broadening awareness and challenging stereotypes or misconceptions about concepts of sexuality and gender that go beyond heterosexuality and the state of being cisgender. Furthermore, the themes in this output discuss the argument by Judith Butler in 1990 about gender as a repeated performance based on social constructs and the heteronormative society's establishment of the illusion of the gender binary which opens an opportunity for people to resist and distort the ideas that instill such traditional roles between men and women, with drag being a tool of expression for these sentiments.

However, the occurrence of drag as an art form is also met with negative reactions and stigma as this does not conform to the traditional values of gender that are supported by the heteronormative majority. Themes in feminist theory are also involved in this output due to the discourse of the gender binary's existence in the story and the real world, including the gender roles and power dynamics between men and women, even in the LGBTQ+ community.

Outside the country, there has been an ongoing protest happening against drag queens and their activities. In November 2022, GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) reports that the LGBTQ+ community in the United States is currently more at-risk, as there have been 141 reports of protests and threats specifically targeting spaces where queer individuals frequently gather, their events, especially ones that feature drag artists (O' Hara, 2022). Moreover, a shooting incident occurred at an LGBTQ+ nightclub where 5 people were killed and 17 people were injured in the middle of celebrating a drag queen's birthday (The Associated Press, 2022). Since then, protests against drag performers have not stopped. As people's exposure to the art form grows, there comes an emergence of groups who believe that drag and its queer nature disrupts traditional values and the youth's minds.

While the art of drag is known as a form of adult entertainment, its recent popularity together with the LGBTQ+ Pride movement allows drag artists to widen their reach and make art that is appropriate for everyone, including children. Drag queens in Western countries have held events where they read storybooks to children in public libraries, bookstores, and schools. With these activities, children become more aware and accepting of diversity through storybooks that tackle cultural backgrounds and LGBTQ+ stories (dragstoryhour.org, n.d.). Conservatives do not find such activities helpful, as they are uncomfortable with the drag artists as they see them as "adult men in women's clothing, dancing and exploring sexual themes" around children (Rufo, 2022), with the belief that it confuses the child with concepts that they consider traditionally abnormal. Conspiracies and narratives about the community and drag artists with them being framed as a "danger" to children are still spreading, which currently affects the welfare of not only LGBTQ+ individuals but also allies who openly express their support for their works and existence.

The drag scene in the Philippines is currently emerging in Filipino media, but individuals who are in the community are not completely safe from discrimination or threats that would put their life at risk. The local queer community is still fighting for the passage of the SOGIE (Sexual

Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression) Equality Bill which provides protection for all Filipino citizens from gender-based discrimination by penalizing those who commit an offense (Moya, 2022). Through this bill, citizens shall not experience being marginalized and deprived of their rights. This aims to prevent hate crimes and harassment based on gender or sexuality and allows more sensitivity toward people and their identification (Ausencillo, 2021). This bill does not exclude anyone nor provide special treatment towards specific groups of people, but rather it asks for marginalized groups to be treated like the majority without prejudice. Without this law, different forms of hate crime and discrimination on gender continue to exist in the country. This does not only affect adult LGBTQ+ individuals but also children who appear 'different' from what is traditionally expected from them based on their gender (Custodio, 2019). They get excluded from school activities, made fun of, or abused in their homes due to how they identify with and the way they express themselves.

With these issues in mind, I intended to finish a creative project that provides awareness about a specific art form that humanizes the struggles and the celebration of LGBTQ+ people and their identity through it as drag remains to be deviant due to its nature of going outside traditional concepts of gender. In addition, I would like to show this intention by creating a digital graphic novel. I would like to illustrate a story that shows the versatility of drag as an art form, and how an individual can portray different nuanced messages while connecting such ideas to how they would like to express themselves to the audience. The usage of digital creative software such as Adobe Photoshop and Adobe After Effects will help fulfill the creation of a digital graphic novel that pays homage to Pinoy *komiks* and will contribute to the local comics industry today.

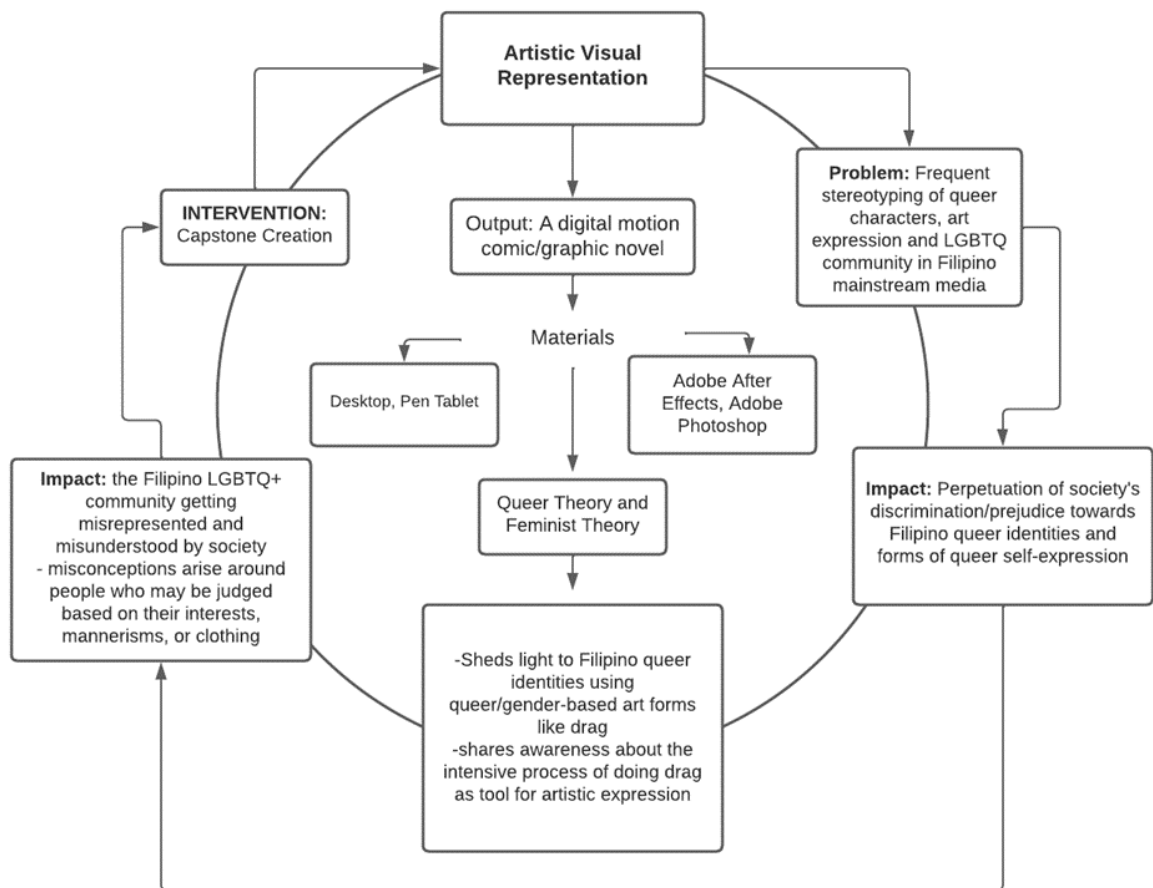


Figure 1 *Creative Framework Representing the Process of Highlighting Filipino Drag Artists and the Integration of Drag in Filipino Contemporary Culture*

Figure 1 visually represents the thought process made for conceptualizing the creative project and the considered factors revolving around the process of making the output. This framework shows the identified variables establishing the relevance of creating the project, and the sequence of how the digital graphic novel will be completed. In this summary, the sequence starts with identifying an issue about the lack of complex representation of LGBTQ+ in Filipino mainstream media, whether it may be characters or stories as they usually end up depicting generalizations of the community, misconceptions, or sometimes outright distortion of queer lives and experiences. These kinds of representations perpetuate ideas that have harmed or will continue to harm queer people in real life or people who simply do not identify with traditional concepts of gender expression/sexuality and their aim to preserve their safety while being able to live and express their real identities and feelings. To contribute to the ongoing movement for LGBTQ+ acceptance and attainment of equal rights in the country, my project aims to feature themes about Queer theory that will help the exploration of issues regarding the “normal” ideas about gender and the existence of alternative concepts of gender and sexual identity, and Feminist theory that emphasizes focus on challenging and dismantling oppressive systems in society that perpetuates social inequality (Arinder, 2020). In tackling the

art of drag in the Filipino context through a graphic novel, the target audiences will have more connection to the themes of the project due to shared cultures and familiarity, which helps in attaining Queer theory's goal of questioning conservative ideas and condemning social ostracism of marginalized groups (Indiana University, n.d.) with diverse SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression) in the Philippines.

For my **research design**, developing the details and the world of the story was done through ethnographic research. The research consists of observing drag shows in the country, reviewing existing interviews with drag artists on various digital media platforms, and interviewing randomly selected 3-5 Filipino artists and audiences from ages 15 and above about experiencing drag from their respective points of view. Their responses and the data to be gathered from various observations contributed to the creative output's details in terms of storytelling and character building. Furthermore, the questions for drag enthusiasts revolve around the reasons and the processes of the art of drag's impact on them before, during, and after discovering and enjoying drag performances. The data for this qualitative survey is obtained via Google Forms, where they can input paragraphs to answer five (5) open-ended questions provided. In addition, the interview for drag artists is conducted by contacting randomly selected Filipino artists on social media based on their availability online. The drag artist was asked for their name, drag persona, and open-ended questions regarding their journey and process in doing the art of drag. Moreover, the information provided by respondents supplemented the other parts of observation and secondary research.

The integration of the data with the story aims to make a creative output, particularly a digital graphic novel that represents the drag artists and audience with intent, relatability, and connection with its target audience. The **target audience** of this graphic novel is teen and adult Filipino 1) drag enthusiasts, which consists of audiences who like watching drag live or online performances, popular TV shows about drag, and drag artists themselves; 2) viewers who are not quite familiar with drag yet curious about the art form; and 3) graphic novel readers who would like to read about LGBTQ+-centered stories that are not necessarily under the romance genre.

In executing my **design process**, the message of my project is realized by creating 24 pages of digital artwork/illustrations that show Filipino elements and values that establish a form of familiarity for Filipino viewers who may not be well-versed with the topic and/or the ideas in the story. The final digital comics will be showcased digitally in a flipbook-style PDF file where the readers can view and skim through the content of the comic book. Adobe Photoshop will be used in creating the illustrations with an art style inspired by 'retro' manga and Pinoy *komiks* (Figure 1), which had a classic comic art technique. While there are styles for inspiration, the creative work will have its own distinct take on the styles mentioned.

Figure 1

Pinoy Komiks: “Kwin”



Note: This cover for “Pinoy Komiks” was published and drawn by comic artist Noly Zamora around 1984 (Lambiek.net, 2022).

I decided to utilize such art styles for the project due to the idea that a significant amount of superhero stories is told through comics and/or manga, and in my perspective, building a drag persona is somewhat aligned with the concept of superheroes having their “human form” and their alter ego in which they transform into—drag tends to make its artists think of the kind of character they will become, usually through the ‘drag name’ and the appearance that they will have through wigs, makeup, and costumes.

Figure 2

Character Concept



Note: Figure 2 shows an early concept of the main character with her surroundings which contain elements that are related to her background/field of work as a Filipino drag performer.

The plot of the story follows a mid-30s Filipino woman who decides to juggle her hard-earned position at a corporate job with becoming a drag queen as she becomes tired of being a people pleaser at work and at home. This story features the lives of drag artists, the "oddity" of being a cis-female drag queen in a male-dominated industry, explore various issues within the LGBTQ+ community, specific experiences in queer spaces, and living up to societal standards as a woman and a daughter in a conservative, patriarchal society/family.

The portrayal of integrating the art of drag in Filipino culture will be shown through Filipino characters and the setting of the story which are reflected in the data that will be gathered from this paper's research design and methodology. The design and elements included in the creative output will feature inspirations from existing media about drag in the Philippines and outside the country such as Figure 4, which refers to a drag-style interpretation of an element that is part of traditional Filipino culture.

Figure 4

Drag Race Philippines Episode 1: Category is... Terno She Better Don't



Note. A screenshot of drag queen contestants' looks on the runway of *Drag Race Philippines*, a local franchise of the American reality TV competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Their outfits are conceptualized versions of the Terno or Filipiniana, a traditional garment worn by Filipino women (Benjamin, 2022).

Pre-Production Stage

This stage was comprised of planning and data gathering for a better understanding of the topic chosen and its application to the themes of the creative project's story and illustrations. The provided schedule for each deliverable was arranged by making a Gantt chart for progress tracking and recording dates/weeks when a deliverable should be accomplished. I also made a budget chart to monitor the costs and funds needed throughout the whole project from beginning to end. For data gathering, I conducted a survey for drag enthusiasts via Google Forms, and I held an online interview with a drag performer through a Zoom call. The interview's audio and video were recorded for documentation and reporting purposes only. The research conducted becomes a guide in how I would build the characters and story of the graphic novel. In addition, this supplements the planning for the art style and the general look of the creative project.

Production Stage

This stage contains the creation of the comic. In this part, I wrote the story and the script for each page of the material. Based on character and environment studies made in Pre-Production, I started sketching and thumbnailing the sequence of the story to determine effective compositions per panel which take a significant part in illustrating the story in 24 pages on Adobe Photoshop, a creative computer software for raster graphics editing and non-vector-based illustrations (Adobe, n.d.). The illustrations are done in a specific style that is inspired by retro Pinoy Komiks and Japanese manga to make the artwork evoke familiarity and add appeal to the intended audience, such as graphic novel readers who gravitate towards Western comics and manga.

Post-Production Stage

In the Post-Production Stage is where I mostly refine the illustrations made for the graphic novel. The motion comic aspect of the output is used to promote or introduce the story to the viewers, to pique their interest in reading the graphic novel. I also aim to outsource talent for the accompanying music that will play through the duration of the motion comic teaser. The physical version of the graphic novel will be prepared for printing.

Review of Related Literature

This section of the paper reviews a collection of gathered literature, studies, and discourse correlated to the topic and medium used for this creative project through the lens of Queer theory as its theoretical framework. It includes discussing topics about the history, status, and the viewers' perception of Philippine drag and Philippine Komiks today.

Philippine Drag, its Origins, and the Local Scene

The art of drag and its history in the country is evident from the precolonial era to the Spanish and World War II eras which had their contributions to shaping the local LGBTQ+ community, culture, and forms of queer expressions that are reflected in the local drag scene found today. According to Garcia (2004), crossdressing and the existence of effeminate Filipino men, and trans women (which he labeled 'gender crossers') were evident in the pre-colonial era. These individuals had an important role in society as babaylans who were respected as spiritual leaders and political figures that had authority over tribes. They were treated with equal respect and perceived the same way women were seen during that time. This positive image drastically changed as Spanish colonizers became aware of them, considered them a threat, and indoctrinated Filipinos with Catholicism and its values which oppose/condemn homosexuality, and queer expressions of gender.

Despite the long years of strong Spanish/Catholic influence in the country, a few of them continued, one of them is Crispulo 'Pulong' Luna, who was seen during early American

occupation dressed in *baro't saya*, traditional clothing intended for Filipino women and Japanese geisha clothing in their photos. In addition, in the later parts of World War II, there was a Filipino crossdresser/vaudeville performer named Walter Dempster Jr. (also known as Walterina Markova) who revealed in an interview with Klein (2006) that he was forced to be a “comfort gay”, or a male sex slave for Japanese soldiers and performed burlesque for American soldiers stationed in the Philippines after he and his fellow crossdresser friends were able to escape from the Japanese. His life story as a “comfort gay” later inspired a movie to be produced and released in 2000, which introduced a story to the Filipino audience about an openly queer individual during a historical time in the country’s past when such existence may not be thought of. In terms of “drag visibility” in Filipino pop culture and mainstream media through the years, the film was one of the few media made that covered elements of drag before it was known as “drag” in the country.

Drag was recognized in the country through ‘Miss Gay’ pageants done in different places in the Philippines. The first Miss Gay pageant in the Philippines was held in 1979 and was done in the same fashion as other well-known pageants in the Philippines and the world, except that the contestants are Filipino gays, bisexuals, and trans women and have a purpose to “create a platform for LGBT community” (EqualLove.org, n.d.). Contestants in such pageants do their best to show off their skills in building their feminine appearances through makeup, gowns, elaborate costumes, and wigs; and having the wit to answer questions that reflect social issues, or not as it depends on the type of pageants held, as there are a lot of Miss Gay pageants (usually found in barangays and in small locations) that are purely held as a form of entertainment or a parody of such “serious” pageants and make a spectacle out of queer Filipino beauty queens who are willing to make people laugh with their wits, appearances, and talents. Despite the frequent appearance of LGBTQ+ personalities and talent in Philippine media, the early 2000s Philippine media lacked detailed representations of queer people, specifically gay men who were usually inserted as a ‘funny sidekick’ to the main character, or that they are meant to stand as the comic in media they are included in.

The artistry of drag that was usually found in mainstream media was made for only one purpose—which is to make people laugh through male personalities who act effeminate. Drag as an art form with its own specific characteristics focused on exaggerating concepts around heteronormative views on gender binary has only been available for a niche audience until Western TV shows about drag became globally popular, which eventually led to having a localized platform for Filipino drag queens to showcase their talent. Drag Race Philippines, a local franchise of the American reality TV show RuPaul’s Drag Race aired last August 17, 2022 (Jusay, 2022) and was well-received by Filipino and international audiences who were originally fans of its main franchise.

The show was received well as the episodes became widely discussed on different social media platforms and the artistry of each drag queen cast in the show was given appreciation through social media posts online (Ricaña, Giron, & Caletina, 2022). Filipino drag queen and Drag Race Philippines contestant Eva Le Queen stated in an interview with CNN Philippines (Baltar, 2022) that the existence of such a platform in the country is a “huge win” for the local drag scene and the LGBTQ+ community as the treatment towards them and their work had a positive change from how it was years ago, and that them being offered to perform outside clubs

that used to be the only place where they can practice their art form can be a ray of hope for LGBTQ+ identities and artists to be heard more in a conservative country like the Philippines.

What is a Motion Comic?

According to Tucker, Minichiello, and Roxburgh (2018), motion comics are considered an integration of different art forms such as animation, graphic design, film, and sound design into the elements of traditional comics with its panels, illustrations, and story; and is considered as a “hybrid medium”. It is a digital presentation of traditional comics with added music, voices, and animation which makes it immersive to its viewers. Its notable origins can be traced back to ‘My Marvel Superheroes’ which was published in 1966 and was based on its original print comics with limited animation.

The emergence of motion comics as its own distinct genre occurred and was popularized around the early 2000s as “The Watchmen” was released in 2008. ‘Motion comics’ as its own piqued the viewers’ interest due to it being introduced as a novel way to read comic books and illustrated stories. Smith (2012) explains that the production of a motion comic starts with the collaboration of the comic book artist and the animator to create a product that faithfully captures the essence of the source material. Moreover, this re-telling of a comic book in a new medium requires the original artworks and these will be manipulated or modified by the animator to translate them properly into its cinematic version. For instance, adapting traditional comics into this format will include processes such as scanning the panels of the comic book, cutting the foreground elements from the background, and creating supplementary artwork to fill the necessary areas for animating the elements in the motion comic. These digitized elements were then edited into cinematic outputs wherein they add effects found in film, such as emphasizing focus through applying blur and adding implied camera movements by animating or scaling panels.

However, there are limitations to adapting traditional static comic books into this multifaceted medium. In the same article, Smith provided statements from creatives involved in making motion comics that state how it remains a challenge for them to make the output as close as it is to the original work. Some animators have to omit speech bubbles/dialogues that would appear too wordy on the screen and make adjustments to how panels are shown. In other cases, they would add more characters and arcs to make the story flow appropriately for a television show format. With these limitations, both viewers and creators in the comic industry have mixed feelings about the purpose of motion comics itself. Tucker, Minichiello, and Roxburgh’s study cover the critiques about the medium and the diversity of styles in it that cannot embody a solidified definition of what a ‘motion comic’ is. While the medium is commended for its aim to be faithful to the source comic compared to other kinds of adaptation, it is criticized for its nature to sit in the middle of comics and animation that it poses confusion about the way it is consumed whether it is read or viewed.

Andersen and Vistisen (2020) provided potential ways to use motion comics where it can be used for adaptations of traditional comics and provide the audience a better view on the story’s pacing through its subtle animations; add supplementary info to the original source and

fill what cannot be seen in traditional comics; stand as an example of multimedia entertainment that features the works of different creative industries, and become an accessible platform for users, particularly comic book fans who would like to tell stories inspired by known comic books and share it within their fandoms. Despite criticism, the capability of motion comics to be executed with wider options and fluidity makes it open to be explored more in the future. Moreover, the authors mentioned have mostly tackled motion comics in the context of the superhero genre, which leaves a room for motion comics to be explored in other genres.

The World of Pinoy *komiks*

The Philippines being a former colony of western countries have made various influences on our culture, which can be evident through our names, food, and art. In the 1920s, the first known Filipino comic was a comic strip in Liwayway magazine titled “Kenkoy”, created by the father of Philippine *komiks*, Anthony “Tony” Velasquez. Kenkoy and its story that comically represents a generalized concept of Filipinos during the American occupation era through its poorly-spoken or “carabao” way of speaking English (De Vera, 2020) opened a new medium for the Filipinos back then to enjoy and popularize, as it became a revolutionary way to read, it is a break from the usual literature that only had texts—comics illustrated the actions of the characters and have such unique speech balloons to show the characters’ speech. Making comics became a hit for Filipino artists to explore due to its flexibility and openness to make creative stories.

Although the creation of Pinoy *komiks* was heavily inspired by American aesthetics and visuals that were evident in works like Kenkoy which sets Pinoy comedy/humor through characters while being affected by colonization, Filipinos made a way to make stories that reimagine Philippine folklore, myth, and epics through the art form (Reyes, 2009). Through these works, comics as an art form did not only become a form of entertainment and/or the precolonial Philippines’ reintroduction to the audience but also a medium where Filipino values and life lessons were instilled in Filipino readers. Comics also helped as both entertainment and aid in dealing with the harrowing events of World War II in the Philippines. After the first releases of illustrated stories in leading comic magazines, comics became the main source of entertainment in the country which opened the creation of stories that went beyond the humorous and heroic. Fantasy-themed comics made by notable Pinoy comic artists like Mars Ravelo and Carlo J. Caparas became a way of escapism for Filipinos who suffered through difficult times in the country, and it became a medium for them to reimagine a way of life that is away from what they have experienced.

The Philippine comic industry thrived until the emerging popularity of other media such as radio and television, where audiences had more ways to be entertained and be exposed to international works such as cartoons and Japanese manga and anime, which led to printed Pinoy *komiks* losing demand from the 1980s/90s onwards (Reyes, 2009). The local *komiks* scene remains to have a niche following in the present, but it is evolving and adapting to the times as they are now digitally available. Penlab Philippines created a platform for Filipino artists to create digital graphic novels/comics where they can bring “quality Filipino *komiks* together in one place” as stated in an interview conducted by Co (2022) with the founders of Penlab. It is now

accessible as a website or an app on Android and iOS where it enables users to view and read their diverse collection of new digital Pinoy *komiks*.

Significance of Progressive LGBTQ+ Representation in Media

Media is an influential tool that affects its viewers' perception and attitude toward social issues, beliefs, ideologies, and certain communities. Based on Arias' study in 2019, the media has direct and indirect effects which differ based on the number of people it has influenced. Its direct effect pertains to how media spreads awareness about new information to individuals and its capacity to set their stance or change their perception about it, and indirect effect to how media influences or spreads information to a wider audience, a community or society. In addition, this study supports the idea that media shown on a wider scale can alter viewers' perception on a particular topic and that it changes norms in communities.

As media entertains the viewers, it also provides knowledge which viewers may not be familiar with or consciously aware of. Moreover, people seeing their experiences on media can build discussions among each other and build communities which share commonalities with social or ethnic backgrounds, helping them navigate how they stand in societies they participate in. According to BBC (n.d.), media and how it provides information to the public can have different outcomes and reception based on how the information is written, how images are taken, and the kinds of information that are either included or omitted will form different limited perspectives that the viewers will receive and form opinions or beliefs based on what was shown.

Representation in media is a way for viewers, especially minorities to see their existence be validated and be known to other people. Moreover, representation has the capacity to either harm or empower viewers based on the intention in depicting certain social backgrounds in media (MediaSmarts, 2022). As the country preserves its conservative and religious culture, concepts about queer lives and identities remain unsupported, and this stance is shown in the way they choose to represent the queer community in media. For example, the Philippines still has a long way when it comes to portraying LGBTQ+ personalities and characters in leading media platforms as most themes regarding diverse SOGIE throughout history of our local media are either censored or are displayed with intention to paint a certain image on LGBTQ+ individuals that lead the majority into forming misconceptions and prejudice against them (Tagudina, 2012). As a result, this has negatively affected not only LGBTQ+ individuals but also others who appear or subconsciously act in ways that are different from expected gender norms.

Nevertheless, the negative depictions of the community are slowly changing due to newer studies and developing perceptions about gender and sexuality in different countries. Moreover, this change has led to creation of stories that provide more complex stories and narratives about the community which results to viewers creating significant dialogues and addressing their unconscious biases/misconceptions about people who do not conform to gender norms; and there are individuals in the community who found a sense of belonging and validation from seeing people who are similar to them through queer personalities and characters that they see (Action For Children Organization, n.d.). Through positive representation, it gives minorities a platform to share their voices and struggles that were barely understood in the past. It humanizes their experiences which makes them visible in a way that

is beyond what's "different" in them, be acknowledged for what they do and not judged for simply living as who they are because they share the same human condition with the majority.

LGBTQ+ Representation in Pinoy *komiks*

The evolution of Philippine *komiks* is evident through the variety of genres and stories available on the Penlab app, as there are stories that go beyond the traditional themes of Pinoy *komiks* back then. There are evident inspirations from both Filipino and foreign media such as Western comics, shows, Japanese anime, and/or manga seen from their art styles. As some of the works featured on the app have gained traction from audiences in different social media online, the existence of such platforms that encourage Filipinos, especially young people can help to revive the lively industry of the art form. On this platform, Filipino *komik* artists have created new stories that include ideas or themes that are more relevant in the present era and more characters that represent diverse backgrounds or walks of life, which includes the LGBTQ+ community.

One of the most popular Pinoy *komiks* that dealt with queer themes in a superhero genre is *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, a story about a stereotypical flamboyant gay man who works in a neighborhood salon and transforms into a beautiful female superhero after swallowing a comically large space rock, a style patterned after Mars Ravelo's popular superhero, *Darna*. On the other hand, Penlab has its section of LGBTQ+ romance genres which are popularly known as BL (Boys' Love) and GL (Girls' Love) that follow the love stories about couples of the same sex/gender (Legaspi, 2021) and these works listed on the platform include stories that revolve around Filipino characters, which may help in providing entertainment for queer Filipinos who yearn for good, positive, and relatable representations of queer romance in media, and/or Filipino BL/GL fans who have to look for foreign stories as Filipino stories with this genre may have been more difficult to find.

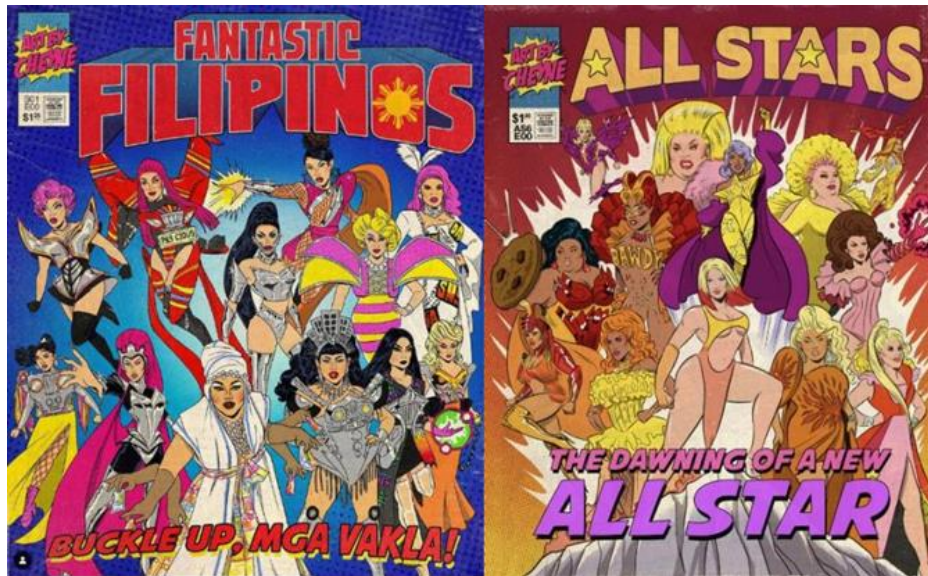
Despite all this progress in art and storytelling, there are still gaps to fill in making more art forms that highlight LGBTQ+ lives and culture in the country. With drag, there are more ways to explore the art form or the appreciation for it that goes beyond drag competitions, and a static art form like comics/graphic novels can make a way to illustrate flashy, active stories like drag where more facets of the art form and the artists who practice it can be shown and celebrated. Illustrating a topic that is not well explored in the country through comics may help boost the audience's interest in the art form and the topic provided as accessible, digital platforms like social media exist where there are multiple options to share visuals to the public with accessibility, and that it is open to be seen by anyone who uses these.

Review of Related Works

This portion of Chapter II covers various media in connection to the topics given in the review of the related literature, particularly artworks/shows that featured the art of drag and utilized elements of traditional comics as a medium and as an art style.

Figure 5

“Drag Superheroes”/ Drag Art Series by Cheyne Gallarde



Hawaii-born Filipino artist Cheyne Gallarde makes an extensive series of vintage superhero comic-inspired cover artworks based on American LGBTQ+ culture and media, especially drag queens/personalities who have competed in the American reality TV show RuPaul's Drag Race.

On his website, Gallarde (n.d.) considers drawing these personalities as his “bread and butter,” and he puts emphasis on highlighting queer people and the LGBTQ+ movement in his artworks.

He states in an interview on Out Front Magazine (Galstad, 2022) that he puts importance on celebrating queer personalities such as drag queens due to the reality that the LGBTQ+ community is still not accepted by the majority, queer individuals in various industries get fewer opportunities due to how they identify, and that he takes major inspiration from drag queens due to the creativity that an artist can have for their drag persona and its capacity to evolve through time.

Figure 6

Zsazsa Zaturannah

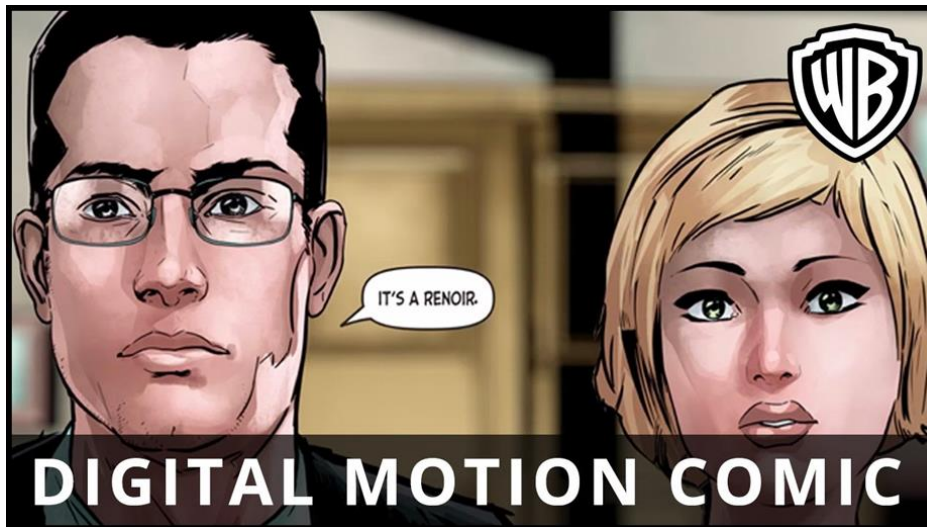


Zsazsa Zaturannah is an LGBTQ-themed Filipino superhero comic book, written by Carlo Vergara in 2003. It follows the character named Ada, an effeminate gay beautician who was given the ability to transform into a female superhero by swallowing a massive space rock and shouting “Zaturannah!”.

Furthermore, Vergara (2010) stated in an interview that this story centers itself on empowering and “un-stereotyping” LGBTQ+ identities which may have been more vulnerable to discrimination as they are deemed by society as stereotypical. As of 2020, five digital volumes of the comic are now available online via Gumroad (ABS-CBN, 2020).

Figure 7

"The Accountant" Motion Comic



"The Accountant" is an 8-minute introduction motion comic by DC Comics and Warner Bros. for its movie in 2016 and its main character, Christian Wolff.

The motion comic tells the story of how the main character lives an unassuming yet mysterious life as an accountant, which eventually shifts into a darker route as he discovers secrets in his line of work (Anderton, 2016).

Figure 8

“Champion of the Rose” Filipino Digital Comic



“Champion of the Rose” is a fantasy digital comic published on May 21, 2021, written by Cat Aquino and drawn by Dominique Duran. In this comic, the writer aims to create a form of media that exhibits inspiration from Filipino history and culture with the intent of the author to convey political messages that she strongly believes in (Yatco, 2021).

The story of the comic follows a transgender swordsman who vows to save a princess whose marriage is made into a tournament prize. In exchange for his saving, the princess will do her utmost to bring him back to his home. This story depicts themes found in the Spanish colonization era in the Philippines and religious imagery specific to Catholicism.

The author thought of making a fantasy comic based on Filipino culture to encourage more Filipino creatives to make stories out of the distinct culture found in the country, which is as worthy as the stories told by Western or any other foreign media.

Figure 9

“Kickass Drag Queen” Digital Comic



Kickass Drag Queen is a digital comic series made by RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 8 winner Bob the Drag Queen, and illustrated by comedian Matteo Lane (Weiss, 2018).

The protagonist in this comic series is portrayed as a superhero that saves gay men from lighthearted LGBTQ+-specific dilemmas, such as issues in gay dating. Moreover, the series has also tackled political issues in the United States and included notable American drag queens from RuPaul’s Drag Race as supervillains with powers associated with the physical features that they are famously known for.

The dialogues used in the comic series refer to popular catchphrases known in LGBTQ+ culture and in Bob the Drag Queen’s fandom. The series was launched on Instagram in August 2017 and it was last updated in April 2019. It was planned to have an animated adaptation in 2018 under Unicorn Island Productions, a company by YouTuber Lilly Singh, but there were no further updates since then.

Results and Discussion

The methods used to gather data around the topic consist of an online qualitative survey and an online interview, which contributed to the creation of the project and the issues tackled in the story. The qualitative survey conducted on Google Forms was for the project's intended audience, which were Filipino drag enthusiasts. In this survey, they were asked eight open-ended questions about their discovery of the term 'drag' as an art form, and how they became enthusiasts, and what they aim to see more from drag, especially in the Philippines.

Moreover, I conducted an online interview with a Filipino drag queen named Mrs. Tan, to gain more perspective from a performer who is active in the local drag scene which provides a glimpse of how she performs and what she experiences as a drag performer in the Philippines. In addition to the conducted interview and survey, I gathered data from online secondary sources such as existing online interviews of Filipino drag queens, social media posts, and forums that both drag artists and drag enthusiasts both engage in to further understand the art form's status today and the culture surrounding it.

Age

 Copy

8 responses

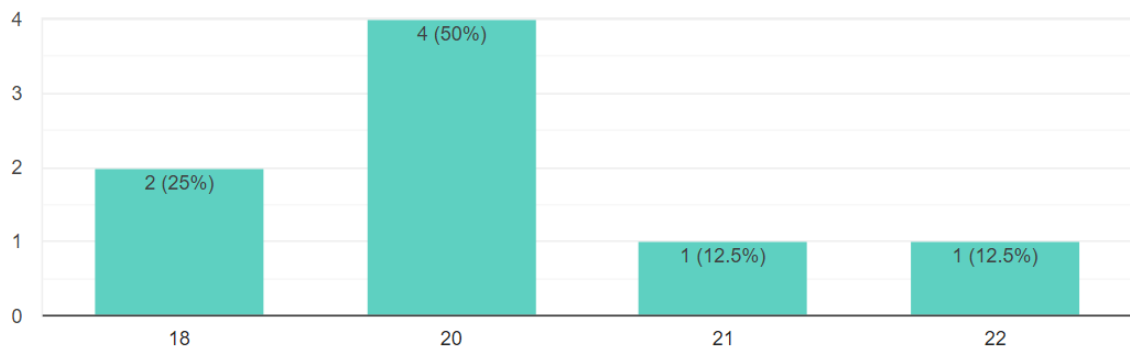


Figure 1 *The ages of the respondents who participated in the qualitative survey*

When did you start becoming a drag fan? / Kailan ka nagsimulang maging fan ng drag?

8 responses

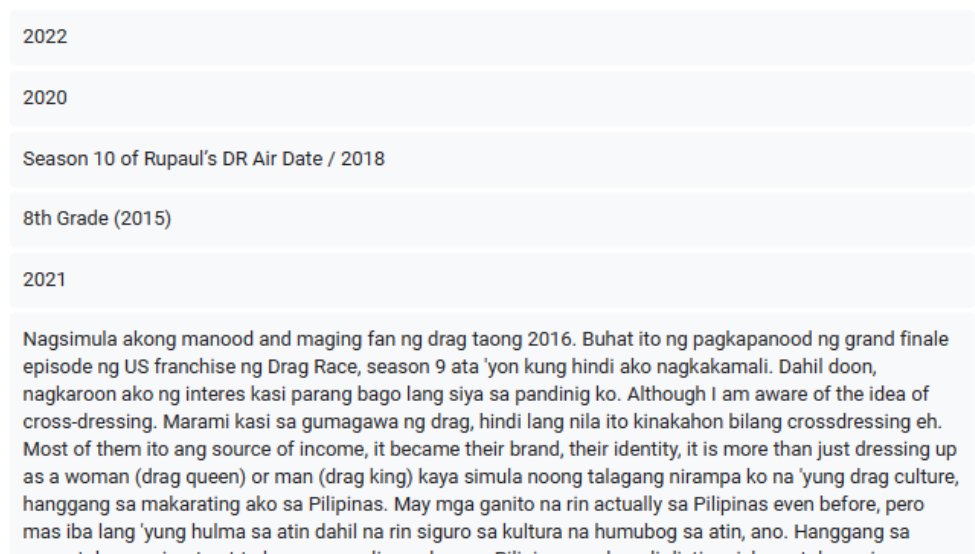


Figure 1.1 Respondents' answer to the question 'When did you start becoming a drag fan?'

Who are the Filipino drag artists and what kind of drag performances do you like to follow or watch? / Sino ang mga Filipino drag artists, at anong klase ng drag performances ang paborito mong panoorin?

8 responses

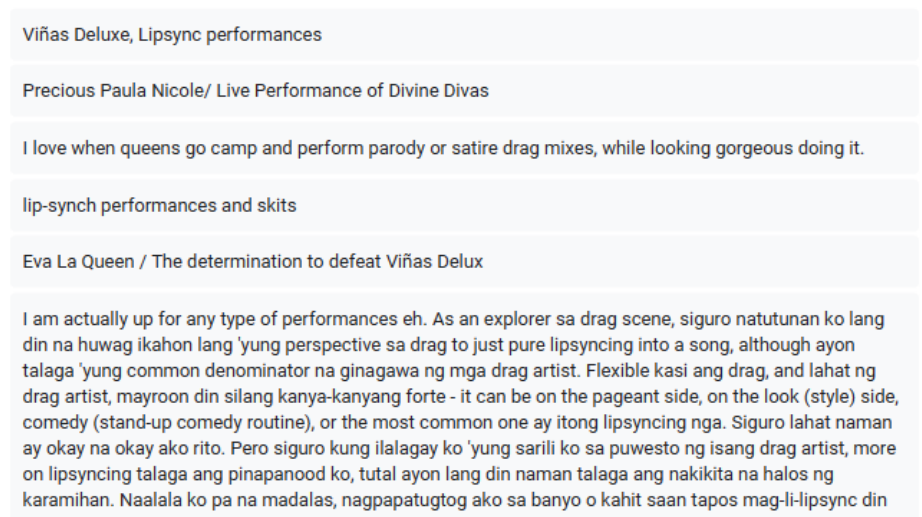


Figure 1.2 The respondents' favorite Filipino drag artists

In Figure 1.2, it shows where most of the drag enthusiasts discover and enjoy the art form. Some of the respondents mentioned names of Filipino drag queens who were cast in Drag Race Philippines in 2022, named Eva Le Queen, Vinas Deluxe, and Marina Summers, Brigiding—drag queens with performances labelled as 'glamour', polished, high feminine drag with elements of camp/humour. Three respondents did not specify nor mentioned a favorite drag artist but

expressed that they would like lip sync performances with humour/comedy mixed in the performances or shows that are “conceptual and exciting”. One respondent answered in detail that they are fine with watching any type of drag performances, as different drag artists have their own styles in performing. If they had to be specific, they would watch lip sync performances most of the time because that is what is widely available, together with comedic performances. In recognizing drag artists in the Philippines, they recognize that major TV competition shows such as DRPH and “Drag Den Philippines” became a significant platform for Filipino drag queens to be known today in the media, with the latter gaining traction on social media as the show was hosted by a former contestant and runner-up in a season of the globally renowned “RuPaul’s Drag Race. They credit both shows being able to highlight drag queens and their struggles which made them more relatable and humanized not only in front of Filipino audiences but also audiences outside the country.

What does a drag performance make you feel when watching it? / Anong pakiramdam mo habang nanonood ng isang drag performance?

8 responses

other hand, you can see Pura Luka Vega's Bleeding Love performance na in the middle of the song ay bigla siyang nagpapatok ng parang blood-like liquid sa dress niya, so gooddd!

Pakiramdam ko tuloy habang pinapanood ito ay super alive. Hindi lang dahil nakakatuwa silang panoorin, pero ayon nga, hindi comedic relief ang dapat na tingin sa mga tulad namin, kasi we are more than just that. It's just that we lack opportunities to showcase these talents kasi hanggang ngayon we live in a society na ang tingin sa mga bakla ay mahihina. Pero bumisita ka sa mga singit ng barangay at club, hindi mahihina ang mga bakla. Isa sila sa mga rason kung bakit may kulay ang mundo sa kabila ng katamlayan ng panahon.

Inspired! I see myself in them and I get a boost watching them do their thing.

For me it's a very unique experience that you can't get from any other type of live show. It's extremely over the top and creative and exaggerated and gives me an immense amount of queer understanding and even almost a feeling of community.

I feel valid

Fuels up my energy.

Figure 1.3 *The respondents' reactions when watching drag performances.*

What do you wish to see for local drag in the future?

8 responses

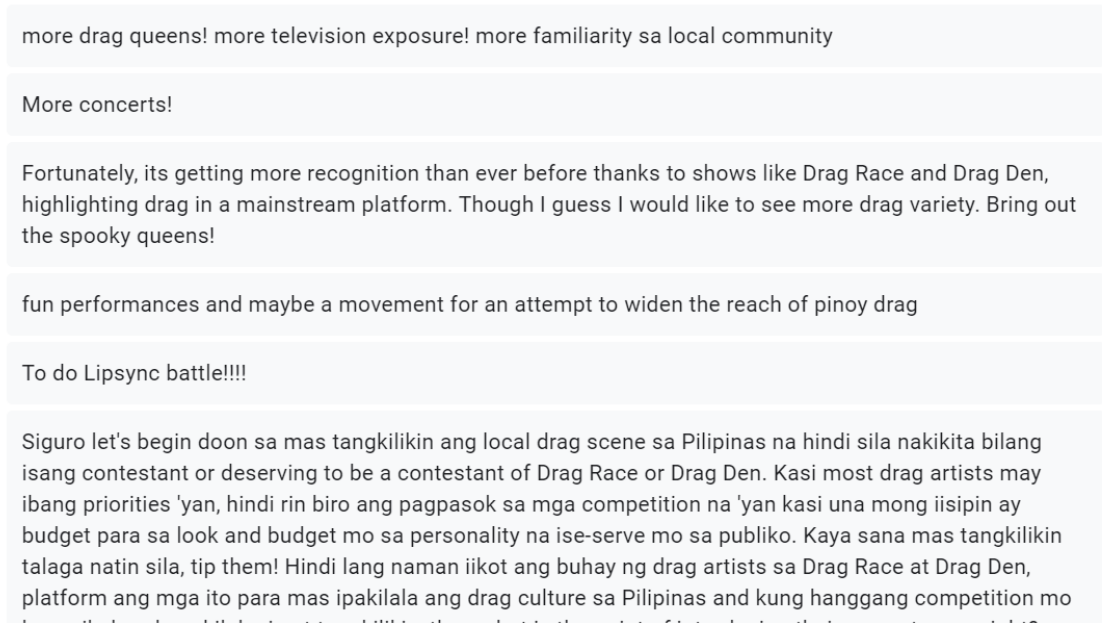


Figure 1.4 *The responders' aspirations for the Filipino drag scene's future.*

From Figures 1.3 to 1.4, most of the respondents answered that drag has a significant effect for their self-esteem. Some respondents answered that they felt empowered and inspired to express themselves more after watching drag performances. In addition, they feel a sense of belonging and empathy when watching the shows as they get to understand more about the queer community and how these unique, over-the-top drag performances communicate themselves to people, which are elements that are not usually seen in other forms of art or media. Furthermore, they stated that they feel alive in watching these shows because it features queer people's capacities and depth in expressing themselves which goes beyond the usual image of queer people as comic relief. They were reminded of the range of performances one can do in drag, as they were able to watch a Filipino drag queen lip syncing to a love song with emotions and stage tricks, and another Filipino drag queen perform the song "Tatsulok", a song expressing the social classes in the Philippines and the rise of injustices experienced by people in poverty as the corrupt upper class gets away with anything through money. With these kinds of performances, they get reminded that queer individuals have more important issues to tell than what Filipino mainstream media portray queer people to be like.

Based on the responses regarding their perspective toward drag before and after their discovery and attachment to it, they express that they have become more appreciative of the hard work that goes into doing the art form. Other respondents answered that it made them more open minded about LGBTQ+ themes and different forms of self-expression and that it also inspired them to be confident in their physical appearances.

Moreover, one respondent stated how it became a place for comfort for them as a person in the LGBTQ+ community and drag lets them find more people who have shared experiences whether it may be the culture, or the struggles that they experience as people who do not belong in the heteronormative majority. Watching drag shows has helped one of the respondents to be inspired and tell more stories about queer people as a writer as they believe that queer people deserve to have their own wins to be more publicized and celebrated, and the political nature of drag inspires them to continue the fight for equal rights regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Through queer media such as drag performances and shows, they get to know more about who they are as a queer person, and that they learn to love themselves better because of them.

In terms of what they want to see for local drag in the future, the respondents' answers exhibit that they look forward to more shows and opportunities for drag artists to be seen in the country and our media. They hope to see more artists performing outside queer spaces and have wider range of audiences. Regarding artistry and style, some respondents would like to see more variety in style, specifically more drag artists that use themes that are adjacent to horror or any aesthetically dark concepts, or more Philippine culture-inspired performances. In addition, there are statements hoping that there are better opportunities for artists, and that their craft be taken as a laborious art form and an actual profession that requires to be supported financially. These types of response elaborate on this by explaining the costs in turning into a specific drag persona that the audience will like, as it is not cheap to pay for/create costumes for specific performances, and the time and energy that is spent on rehearsing for their future shows. In addition, this response hopes to see more fans to pay attention to Philippine drag that is outside TV shows/mainstream media. There are more amazing talents that may not get the opportunity to be cast in these shows as it also takes a lot of money to prepare for major drag competitions, and they can be given support by attending local drag shows, tipping them during their performances in nightclubs, bars, and the usual venues where drag is found. These local drag shows inhibit the essence of Filipino drag that is vastly different from its well-known, globalized, Western counterpart, and this respondent also hopes that Filipino drag fans appreciate this rather than referring to these local drag performances as "cheap" or a form of a knock-off of what they see on TV. Lastly, as it is currently getting more popular these days, they hope for people to encourage this growth and widen the spaces where queer talents and queer art expressions can exist.

Who are you in drag and what is your drag persona?
How long have you been a drag artist?
Where do you perform?
Why did you choose to be a drag artist?
How do you use drag in your performances?
What are the challenges that you face in doing drag?
What keeps you going in doing drag?
How is drag visibility important for media, especially our local mainstream media?
What do you hope for the future of Philippine drag scene?

Figure 1.5 *The set of questions prepared for the online interview with a drag performer.*

These answers from the participants of the qualitative survey showed some similarities with what a local Filipino drag artist wishes to see in future of the local drag scene. In my online interview with Mrs. Tan, a Filipino drag queen shared what her drag persona stands for, why she started to do drag, and how she continues to perform in an emerging queer art scene in a conservative country like the Philippines. She describes her start in drag as “soap operatic” due to the art form coming to her as an epiphany of what her future would be like.

Her discovery of drag and the possibilities in using the art form was somewhat similar to what drag enthusiasts stated in the qualitative survey, as she also found interest through watching a season of RuPaul’s Drag Race. This interest towards drag was strengthened as she already had passion for performing and theater and drag was something that widened her options as she can “play roles” outside the expected roles for men in theater plays. Together with her drag persona that she described as an homage to all the women who raised her, she also includes political messages in her performances.

For her, drag goes beyond crossdressing as she believes that the art opens more discussions and avenues to tell more stories, and that it is a place to represent queer creatives and stories by queer people. People get entertained at first, and the discourse about issues and/or the meaning of the performance follows. This type of performance art also becomes as a form of therapy for her, as it gives her a space to freely express fantasies, and it continuously forms this hope that there would be more queer artists or drag performer that get to live their fantasies in the real world, even if it is seen on a stage as a performance.

However, drag performers encounter multiple challenges in the midst of pursuing this kind of art. The costs of “selling” a fantasy to the audience through different layers of makeup and tailor-made costumes are steep; and preparing for gigs can be as long depending on how the process of an artist is, which may get disproportional to the amount of pay or tips that they receive during and after performances. In spite of the hardships in the process of doing drag, Mrs. Tan has three things to remember which keeps her going: 1) she asks herself why she started performing in drag; 2) she thinks of a certain person in her life who tried to appreciate and understand drag because of her; and 3) she asks herself about the kinds of stories that she can tell in drag, as a minority eager to tell more narratives for fellows who also belong in the same minority. Her creativity and sense of community sustains her hope for the local drag scene to develop into a community where a) future drag performers get to experience the kind of liberation she felt in starting drag, and b) their hard work as drag artists become recognized as a proper job with standardized pay, due to the current status of their income largely coming from talent fees and tips, which sometimes can be insufficient for their needs.

Mrs. Tan’s points on being compensated as a performer is a shared sentiment with other Filipino drag queens, as other queens have shared their experiences on social media. Other than their concerns about pay and its sustainability for their needs and career, they also expressed frustration about the treatment that they sometimes get from the audience. Last October 2022, Mrs. Tan participated in discourse on Twitter with a Filipino drag performer named Myx Chanel about audiences who would give low tips through GCash, a mobile wallet application. This dialogue does not only focus on the number of tips given during a performance, but also the treatment/respect that they get from their audience.



Figure 1.6 Drag queen Myx Chanel's tweets about Filipino drag enthusiasts' criticism about drag performers' negative reaction on receiving low tips during performances.

In Figure 1.6, Mrs. Tan's colleague/fellow drag performer Myx Chanel posted a thread of posts on Twitter to defend themselves from some Twitter users who perceived their frustrations as lack of gratitude towards the drag fans' appreciation towards their work. In this series of posts, she elaborated that some audiences pay very low tips and give disdainful remarks about their worth and their performances. She states that the treatment they get from some people is worse before drag's recent emergence in media. Moreover, she explains tipping is encouraged (but not forced) in their shows as tips are a huge part of their income as entertainers, and this is where they get their means to continue their job and passion.



Figure 1.7 Drag queen Mrs. Tan agreeing with the thread of tweets in Figure 1.6.

According to these drag queens, they do not ask for a specific price when being tipped, but some may get entitled and think of tipping as a way to issue commands or “own” the performer as they have already “paid” for their service. While drag as a performance come in different forms of which can appear informal and humorous, there are times when people forget the performer’s boundaries and not take them seriously as professionals. Also, media’s depiction of queer people may also contribute to how audiences treat queer individuals in real life, as people from LGBTQ+ community (specifically gay men and trans women) are usually depicted either as someone to laugh with (comic relief) or someone/a spectacle to laugh at.

Due to these reasons, drag performers welcome artists who want to experiment through drag, as this can help increase the exposure and accessibility of drag to wider audiences. More exposure helps audiences understand the process of the work and its culture, and an increased demand will help the local drag scene to be recognized as a professional work that is deserving of proper compensation.

Design Process

During the design process of the digital comic, I realized that there are intricacies in making a panel or a page for a comic. Aside from making illustrations, line art and coloring, I had to think of ways to compose panels which seem appropriate for the illustrations, speech bubbles and the flow of the graphics for each page. In the course of creating the pages for the digital comic, I had

to constantly look at style references to keep the consistency of the drawings and the style that the graphic novel is aiming to emulate/show to its target audiences. Most compositions for the panels, especially ones that depict drag shows/performances had to appear dynamic to imply the energy in the scenes.

The usage of references was important not only for the visual treatment of the story but also for the flow of the story and the conflicts covered in the comic, as I had to look for experiences or events that happened to real people while being in queer and/or drag spaces in the Philippines even if the characters and events of the story are purely fictional. The process of creating a graphic novel requires a lot of thought and practice, and proper time management as each page will take hours to create, and it is important to note that following a timeline and/or a schedule such as the Gantt chart would significantly help in a fast-paced production.

The concept, topic, and story of the comics were presented to a group of panelists, and they provided constructive feedback on the output. The discussion about their impressions toward the project was elaborate, as they tried to recall works or references related to drag, especially the recent ones that were helping the emergence of the art scene in the country. The reception for the graphic novel's concept was mostly positive, as they found interest with the concept of drag and its place in the Philippines despite not having much initial knowledge about it, and that the comics piqued their interest through the integration of Philippine culture with the costumes worn by the characters, and that they find the interpretation of the "Pinoy Komiks" style close to what it is aesthetically inspired by, and that they deem it relatable and effective to the intended audience. However, they found some parts of the story and intent somewhat complicated for an introduction of a niche topic to an audience. They would prefer the comics to focus on the transformative aspect of drag to an individual, and how a person discovers who they are through creation of alter egos, especially by using the art of drag. They recommend adding references from popular works and personalities that have dabbled in the art form, such as recent local TV drag shows "Drag Race Philippines", "Drag Den Philippines", and Hollywood movies such as "A Star is Born" and the overall persona of the movie's lead star, Lady Gaga. As much as they believe that the discussion about LGBTQ+ representation is important, they would like to see the output emphasize on the character finding their identity in the art form, and it is reflecting their journey to self-discovery.

Conclusion

Similar to other art forms, the art of drag is versatile and is capable of being used for any intention that an artist may have. While it may be evident that the art form is starting to become popular in the country, drag still has a long way to be fully understood and accepted. Drag is something that can be done by anyone regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and social background, and yet the cost, risks, and its current state are potential factors to the reason that people may hesitate in trying the art form.

The opposition against the art form has not stopped the ongoing appreciation towards drag artists and their performances. The responses gathered from both enthusiasts and performers seem to indicate that the popularity of drag in the country has yet to reach its peak. Based on the answers provided by the respondents, they continue to look forward to new media or spaces where they can see more of their performances. Through watching different forms of drag media, their initial interest to the drag artists' visual performances have led them into knowing more about the art and the artists' experiences. The artists' experiences, personalities, and styles in presenting themselves has made them more connected to the audiences, making them an inspiration to the enthusiasts who also want to get in drag or create something about drag.

The assessment of the digital graphic novel's concept and visual treatment were positively received by the panelists during the project pitch/defense. The comic's visualization of introducing the local drag scene and the art form's execution in the Filipino context were acknowledged and was regarded appropriate for its target audience. On the other hand, the panelists noted that the intent of the story can be improved through creating an emphasis on the transformative aspect of the topic and recognizing popular related works as its references.

Recommendations

Research Topic

The studies conducted for this project remain open for development due to the predetermined limitations during the course of its production. Additional factors or immersive methods can be applied for the topic's ethnographic research for a deeper understanding of the topic. Moreover, the research design of this project can be improved by widening the study's reach and gaining more respondents. Obtaining more data from diverse respondents can help broaden the range of answers and perspectives provided for the questions asked. It is also recommended to conduct personal/face-to-face interviews about the topic to properly connect to the respondents, their background, attitude towards the topic and the questions provided. Lastly, it would be apt to conduct a study, or gain feedback during or after the project's exhibition to have a complete understanding of how the execution of the topic and treatment impact its target audiences.

Creative Process

The creative output can be enhanced through developing the story surrounding the topic, and the planned executions for the visual treatment. The importance of planning ahead is emphasized, as the planned length and treatment for the output is best proportional with the provided timespan for production. Proactivity is important in completing its production as it would have helped in attaining the ideal version of the output. With regards to the ideal product, the motion aspect of the output can be extended to the graphic novel itself either through a cinematic or interactive experience for the viewers. The complexity of the composition on each page can be improved to further emulate an immersive feeling for comic's readers. In terms of the pace of productivity, adherence to given timelines for each step-in production is significant for the completion and in resolving potential unforeseen issues with the output.

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