

Gender performativity in modelling and drag queens



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Introduction

This paper analyses gender performativity among men and women who in the highly gendered occupation of fashion modelling, and it includes famous so-called drag queens who have become iconic figures in this industry. Gender, as ethnomethodologists and feminist theorists have claimed, is an issue of “doing”, and not passive being (Butler, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In the same stance, Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has observed that gender performativity has been proclaimed as potentially making “gender trouble”. Initially, her work caused much philosophical and phenomenological debate and focused on singular sites of transgressive practices, such as drag (Bell et al., 1994). In a postmodernism approach this paper analyses four drag queens who are famous performer and icons in the fashion industry. Although Drag performers have been discriminated from many social arenas, their art and performance comprises three important sociological concepts: gender performativity, simulation, and ethnomethodology.

In the fashion industry there are not rigid methods when it comes to modelling. It is a flexible world with no rules or codes. However there exist normative gender scripts and gender roles which models must perform. Heteronormativity has perpetuated certain roles in the dichotomy of feminine and masculine. Those roles have been imposed in society through different agents of socialization. As Butler claims (1993), there is a heterosexual matrix that has established codes and norms in a dominant way. Therefore, modelling has become an important arena that enables and reproduces such heterosexual narratives of gender that have been highly criticized by feminists. These representations result from day to day activities to everyday

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work on the part of models. If modelling images are fundamental for understanding gender, it is then important to understand something of the gendered nature of the work behind the scenes. The different bodies of the many models that are part of this industry, have also become pieces of ethnographic study where gender performativity takes place to construct the narrative of femininity and masculinity. In the case of these so-called Drag queens, they have escalated to different arenas of social inclusion. Such issue could be framed within social media dynamics.

In the last couple of years, social platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat have created social spaces that have become mediums of socialization. In this particular subject, some accounts of famous drag queens in Instagram have been approached to understand their dynamics and how in their characterizations they enhance the principles of ethnomethodology and simulation.

Drawing on two separate ethnographic projects on fashion models in New York and London, we investigate the bodily practices and gender performances of male and female models. Fashion modelling is the professionalization of multiple types of gender performance; it is a market in which performances of masculinities and femininities are used to sell commodities and, in addition, a labour market where models commodify themselves to clients - fashion designers, photographers, and casting directors - and are promoted as such by modelling agents (known as 'bookers'). Bringing these two ethnographies together provides insights into the comparatively different ways that male and female models 'do' gender within the same industry.

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We observe a number of contrasts: unexpectedly, male models strategically 'drag up' at work. They parody heterosexuality or homosexuality to increase their market potential. They 'do' gender in strategic ways to enhance their employability to different clients. Hence men deploy non-normative gender and sexual identities that, while temporary and limited to the workplace, have the potential to upset heteronormative discourses.

Such subversive performances suggest gender performativity can be both disruptive and reproductive of stable gendered orders. We conclude with a discussion of how gender performances are potentially unstable and dynamic, while also grounding and stabilizing, and always relational and context-specific.

Theoretical Frame:

Gender Performativity

Alongside ethnomethodological work on 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987), Butler has been influential in the explosion of literature on gender and the body (see Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994; Grosz and Probyn, 1996). This work claims that gender has no ontological reality; it is an effect of codes endlessly and compulsively repeated within the hegemonic framework of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980). Thus, sexed bodies are not the natural units upon which gender is socially imposed; gender is "performative" and repeated renditions of gender performances serve to generate the appearance of 'difference' (Butler, 1994).

The inherent instability of gender in Butler's early work (1990) – she has subsequently re-examined this (1993, 1994, 2004) – points to potential disruptions and discontinuities of gender (Harding, 1998; Henderson, 1993) with the parodic qualities of drag being taken as one example of a radical challenge to gender norms (Bell et al., 1994). However, ultimately all gender is a form of drag and thus not all drag is transgressive. In a re-evaluation, Butler (1994: 32) is critical of the view that 'if gender is performative ... it must be radically free', and critical of the view that 'if we were all more dragged out gender life would necessarily become more expansive, less restrictive' (Butler, 1994: 33, see also Butler, 2004). Drag needs to be situated or contextualized before claims about it can be critically analysed.

Butler's arguments are suggestive of new gender possibilities but empirical application is scant. Feminist post-structuralists have focused on gendered meanings through which discourses can 'make sense' of sexed bodies (de Lauretis, 1987; Diamond and Quinby, 1988; Grosz, 1994), but this move to understand discursive systems is divorced from the material world and everyday practices within it. There are exceptions.

Studies have shown that discourses of gender regimes can change, for instance among families in developing China (Powell and Cook, 2006). Other analysis suggests that bodies materialize in the image of organizationally-specific discourses of gender (Borgerson, 2005), as classed and sexed bodies in Bettie's (2003) study of high school girl culture, and as nationally-grounded sexualized bodies in the world of dance, which Nash (2000) sees as a travelling set of discourses that bodies perform.

In studies of women at work, the businesswoman ‘power dresses’ her body for the corporate workplace (Entwistle, 1997, 2000) and women workers perform the ‘docile and dexterous’ body on the factory floor in Mexican maquiladoras (Salzinger, 2003). Men at work similarly enact different scripts of masculinity within situational practices and relations (Connell, 2005). Broader social norms structure workplace expectations of what men should do, such as the ‘camp’ hairstylist which threatens to destabilize masculinity in its hegemonic form, or the ‘macho’ fire fighter who upholds it (Hall et al., 2007). Thus, organizational environments serve as contexts for the iteration of gender, creating the conditions for particular subjectivities (Borgerson, 2005; see also Brewis, 2000, on sex work).

We extend this analysis to examine gender performativity in a work context where men and women perform the same job but within very different discursive settings of appropriate gender identities. Further, modelling sits outside formal organizations, which have been the focus of so much research. Our comparative analysis is especially useful since gender is a relational construct (Deutsch, 2009) and such a comparative case offers insight into how men’s and women’s bodies matter differently. Furthermore, as Deutsch notes, while much research on gender performances attempt to demonstrate the ways in which women or men ‘do’ gender, and how discourses of difference are maintained and reified through practice, we suggest that the presence of men in fashion modelling holds potential to ‘undo’ gender.

We examine how gendered bodies are produced differently in routine performances and practices of modelling work, through various

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investments and techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973) and through particular embodied performances.

Focusing on everyday transgressions does not mean shifting attention to individual performances. While performance assumes a voluntary subject, performativity denies voluntarism (Butler, 1994) although, in reality, this distinction blurs, as Lloyd (1999) argues, since all individual performances are preceded by, or predicated upon, performativity. Thus, to consider individual performances means considering how gender performativity is enacted in and through individual acts, not privileging the latter. Some performances may imply agency, as when models consciously attempt to produce a desired appearance, with styles of dressing and walking, in strategic hope of securing work. However, performativity refers to the fact that gendered subjectivity takes place within social contexts of gender and sexual inequality that exceed the individual. Models are always caught up in the unconscious displays of femininity and masculinity inextricably linked to (hetero)sexual desire. For the most part, these two are mutually reinforcing, although male models can and do step outside the heteronormative script, as we describe below.

Data and Methodology

This paper is based on two separate datasets of men and women working in the fashion modelling industry collected independently by each researcher with an oversampling on male models. Entwistle's study consists of interviews with 25 male models between 2000 and 2001 in London and New York model agencies, and interviews with eight of their agents. Mears' study, from 2005 to 2006, consists of 40 interviews with male and <https://assignbuster.com/gender-performativity-in-modelling-and-drag-queens/>

female models in New York and London, evenly split by gender and city. Mears also interviewed 24 bookers, seven accountants/business managers and two bookers' assistants in New York and London.

These interviews were supported by observations of models in situ by both Entwistle, during interviews with male models at their modelling agencies, and Mears, who worked as a fashion model.

Models in this study ranged from 18 to 32 (women) and 18 to 44 (men); the mean age of male and female respondents was 26 and 23, respectively.

Sixteen models had been modelling for three years or less, while just four had modelled for over ten years; the mean time of their participation in the modelling market was just under five years.

While we have published on these two studies (Entwistle, 2002, 2004, 2009; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Mears and Finlay, 2005; Mears, 2008, 2011; Godart and Mears, 2009), this paper brings both studies together for the first time in comparative analysis of gender in this single occupation.

Fashion Modelling as a Case Study of Gender Performativity

Modelling work for women dates back to Charles Frederick Worth, who dressed live mannequins in his Parisian dress salon in the late 19th century. Comparatively, few modelling opportunities existed for men, even as New York City agencies began to represent them in the late 1960s - four decades after the John Powers' modelling agency for women opened in New York (Evans, 2001; Scott, 2008). Only relatively recently have male models become a prominent feature in the visual landscape. Sexualized images of young male models emerged over the 1980s and

1990s in advertising, women's magazines, 'new' men's magazines and in popular iconography, such as the 1982 Calvin Klein billboards of a bare-chested man (notably an Olympic athlete, not a model) in briefs in Times Square (Bordo, 1999).

Contemporary popular culture encourages unprecedented levels of scrutiny paid to men's bodies with increasingly rigid standards of perfection in fitness magazines (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009), expanded marketing geared towards men (Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Jackson et al., 2001) and increased investment by men in their appearances (Gill, 2003; Gill et al., 2000, 2005). These representations pose an apparent challenge to traditional notions of masculinity and the sort of work that men could aspire to do, with more young men approaching model agencies' on spec' now than ever before.

In order to understand how male and female models 'do' gender, it is necessary to outline some salient features of their work. First, modelling places primary emphasis on the body. Models sell their 'look' to clients, and their 'bookers' broker the trade. Beyond basic attractiveness, height and size requirements (for women, typically at least 5'9" or 175.3 cm; measurements close to 34"-24"-34" or 86.4-61-86.4 cm; for men a height of 6'0" to 6'3" and a waist of 32" or 183-190.5 cm and 81.3 cm, respectively), a model's look is sized up as a matter of personal tastes and evaluations of his or her appeal (Mears and Finlay, 2005).

To see if they have the right 'look' or not, models audition for assignments in a process known as 'casting'. At a casting, the model shows their '

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book', or portfolio of pictures, and gives the client a 'composite card', which has on it the model's name, agency name, sample of pictures, and measurements. If interested, the client may take the model's picture, have them try on a sample of clothing, and in the case of runway bookings, ask to see the model's catwalk.

This investment of value in the aesthetic appearance of the body makes modelling a unique occupation for men, historically on the other side of the objectifying gaze.

Modelling is 'feminine' work that prizes traits and practices - good looks, posing, care of one's body - traditionally unacceptable to conventions of white heterosexual masculinity (see Bordo, 1999, for a discussion of black masculinity). Adverts before the 1960s reflect a cultural discomfort with men in front of the camera lens, and when men posed alone in fashion images, they tended to look off into the distance, avoiding a direct, homoerotic gaze (Nixon, 1996; Scott, 2008). Today, however, male models connote 'to be looked at-ness' similar to women in popular imagery (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975).

In addition to being assessed on their looks, models are judged on the perceived merits of their 'personalities'. Like other workers in service and 'aesthetic labour' industries (Nickson et al., 2001; Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003), models have to manufacture an appropriate aesthetic surface and project a particular 'self' in the form of personality and energy (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Wissinger, 2007a, 2007b).

This performance of personality, not unique to fashion modelling, happens under unique conditions for male and female models due to the gendered nature of modelling work and the fact that the sex composition of the fashion industry as a whole over-represents women and gay men. Although labour market data on sexual minorities is not collected, it is commonly acknowledged that fashion has a preponderance of gay men in positions of power and influence (Bordo, 1999; McRobbie, 1998; Wilson, 2005). Participants in our samples estimated that upwards of 75% of men in the fashion industry are gay, excluding the male models themselves, who are widely believed to be majority heterosexual, as our own sample testifies. Since the 1980s, gay men in influential roles as designers, stylists, and model bookers have been at the forefront of changing representations of masculinity, positioned for visual homo-social pleasures (Bordo, 1999). These 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984) set the terms of work under which male models, especially, have to adapt their bodies and 'personalities'.

Lastly, modelling shifts the usual terms and conditions of work such that male models are in one of the few industries (along with sex work) with a significant inverted wage gap (Escoffier, 2003; see also MacKinnon, 1987, for a feminist critique). Almost uniformly, women who do 'women's work' suffer a pay penalty, (Browne, 2006), yet in modelling, at every level of work, from catalogues to catwalks, men's rates are below women's, and the difference is stark. For example, at a New York Fashion Week show for a major American designer in 2006, female models earned

about \$2, 000 for roughly six hours of work, whereas male models earned \$2, 000 worth of the designer's clothing.

Men's and women's earnings distributions are grossly unequal at every level for equal work across almost all types of jobs, with men generally earning half that of their female counterparts.

Thus, modelling can be described as 'women's work' both technically - it is disproportionately a 'female job' with a concentration of women - and culturally - it is a non-traditional job for men (see Williams, 1995). These peculiar features make modelling a site that 'queers' masculinity and 'straightens out' femininity. That is, modelling is a world of work that enacts the reproduction of traditional notions of femininity, or 'emphasized femininity', and simultaneously has the potential to debunk idealized or 'hegemonic' masculinity (Connell, 2005). To analyse this, we examine two different levels of modelling work. First, we attend to work on the body - the shaping of physical appearances. Second, we examine work of the body done in the performances of self/gendered subjectivities. This distinction is artificial, as phenomenology attests, but we use it pragmatically to draw an analytical distinction between work on managing the outward shape/size of the body and that of bodily performances of self/'personality'. By examining these key elements of modelling work, we demonstrate different ways that male and female models 'do' gender.

Working on the Body

As the professionalization of types of gender performance, women craft themselves into 'ornamental objects' in modelling (Mears, 2008). This process is continuous with normative femininity, premised on ornamentation and decoration, and, thus, their performances look like what models - and women generally - are, and not something that models especially do (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 141). Male models are also 'doing gender', but in contradictory terms. Their masculinity is on display before a sexualized gaze, and a predominantly gay gaze. Thus, how men and women experience the work differs substantially in their daily rituals of body management, i. e. the work they perform on the body - such things as body size management, dress, and comportment. Such 'bodily gestures, movements and styles' (Butler, 1990: 139-40) are significant modes for the presentation of the body at work and the performativity of hetero-normative gender.

Shaping the Body

Perhaps the clearest difference in models' gender performances is the management of body shape and weight. Models are frequently undressed or underdressed in semi-public spaces and their bodies are routinely measured, touched, groomed and sometimes treated as mannequins in garment construction. In observations of castings, we witnessed women and men routinely asked to change clothes often with no or little privacy, and male models in particular are habitually asked to remove their shirts so clients and bookers may inspect their stomach muscles. Body shape is therefore a major issue, but how models think

about their bodies and experience the monitoring of their bodies is gendered.

In interviews, women talked of how they assessed their bodies in constant anticipation of being assessed by others. They spoke of a perpetual worry that clothes will be too tight, that their bookers will make negative comments, and that clients will take a measuring tape to their hips. Even the slimmest women, after initially claiming positive body images, confessed to the pressure of being surrounded by younger and slimmer competition. For many, this fuels a critical stance towards their bodies that is an exaggeration of what many women feel about their body shape. Addison, 19, a model in London for two years, explains that she had never looked at her body with quite so much disdain, not since her bookers in London told her to reduce her 37" hip measurement to 35" (94 cm to 88.9 cm):

And after ... I've never stopped thinking about it. It's like everything I eat, I just wonder like, 'oh God I shouldn't be doing this' and I never used to do that. It's just completely changed my image of myself, and everything, what I eat. Yeah, I find myself comparing, to other girls, like my body, and I just do it without thinking.

Male models also talk about the surveillance of their bodies, but their descriptions lack the emotional charge evident in the women's accounts, and they are more likely to confront the challenges of their bodily capital with straightforward acceptance, as in, 'Well, time to hit the gym', or pay better attention to nutrition. For JD, it was expressed as a simple matter of eating fewer kebabs; for Owen, it was fewer Krispy Kreme

doughnuts; for Ian, it was playing more sports. Several male models joke about their skinny bodies, and bemoan their inability to put on weight or to build muscle. But it seems just that, a joke. Edward, a London model, comments on the 'six-pack' of other models and his booker's insistence that he goes to the gym, but, he says, he takes it 'with a pinch of salt, I'm not that concerned'. Women succumb to intense demands to be physically perfect, while men largely resist such expectations. Dressing the Body

The model's dress style is a key marker of the body to be worked on. Bookers take the initial steps to guide models towards an appropriately fashionable disposition in their dress, filtering their wardrobes, instructing them to look at Vogue, even taking them shopping to hip retailers like Topshop. At an agency observed in New York, bookers instruct new models to arrive early the day of important castings for an 'outfit check'. A spare Marc Jacobs dress hangs in the coat closet, waiting to adorn the unstylish model.

Male models do not receive such attention because dressing is not as significant a feature of their work-day presentation of self, and they pay little attention to it. In fact, the more a male model frets about his appearance, the less attractive he becomes. In interviews, bookers suggest that male modelling requires less skill and craft than women's modelling, and that there is something unseemly about a man trying too hard: as the owner of an agency in London notes, 'The boys are just cool like that', meaning that men do not, and should not, try to be ornamental objects.

Male models largely agree, and are aware of a danger of being
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perceived as too stylish. One male model who is dating a female model explains:

I think from a boy point of view ... there isn't much you have to do. It's different for girls. Like, my girlfriend explained, in Paris she has to go to the castings looking a certain way, whereas in London and New York I can just kind of rock on to an extent looking casual.

(Lucas, 26, London)

Such observations resonate with studies of gender and dress.

Women have long been connected to dress and adornment, while men's dress has been largely obscured from history (Breward, 1999; Tseelon, 1995; Wilson, 1993). Discourses on the supposed vanity and superficiality of femininity and women's supposed love of all things sartorial are thus performative of femininity, and women's dress is read as significant of her sexuality (in rape trials, for example, a fact ironically challenged in 2011 with 'Slut Walk' demonstrations internationally). However, rarely did the male models show any interest in adornment; indeed, they take pride in not caring about their dress and overall appearance. Women, these male models imply, are well suited to be ornamental objects, but not men.

Catwalking

Asymmetrical gendered bodily practices are further evident on the 'catwalk', where women and men 'strut' the length of an illuminated runway at a fashion show under enormously different expectations.

Women may undergo hours of walking practice, or 'runway lessons' with a professional catwalk 'coach'. Mears attended one such lesson during Fashion

Week in New York lasting two hours. In field notes she records her observations as Felix, an openly gay man and 'runway coach', instructed models on how to prepare for the catwalk:

For the next hour Felix will have us walk toward him and back again, taking turns. Sometimes he'll walk first and we try to copy it, or he'll just say where we need to modify. He keeps telling one woman that she needs to take larger steps. He tells me my right shoulder is stiff. At one point he tells me after I walk: 'Don't charge at a man. Come to him. Flirt.' Walking toward me coyly, the way I should learn to walk, he adds, '*Can - I - take - your - order ?*'

For women, embodying this gendered identity - of a woman who offers sex deferentially to a man - is not far removed from dominant ideals of female sexuality (Bordo, 1999; MacKinnon, 1987). Women are positioned to see themselves as sex objects, and several in our interviews had imagined themselves as models from a young age. Becoming a model for a woman is to attain 'emphasized femininity', a privileged place within culturally dominant expectations of womanhood (Connell, 2005). However, the overwhelming majority of men enter modelling through an agent's encouragement, not in pursuit of a childhood dream. They come to the field not having thought much about their looks, as have their female counterparts. Despite having less social preparation to sell their bodies, men generally get less training in new ways of 'doing' masculinity. When asked if he trained with a catwalk coach, one London male model seemed surprised such a thing exists: 'No. Not at all. They just put me out there and I did the

show and I just learned it as I rolled.' Men must 'pick up' bodily skills for the runway and the camera over time and largely on their own.

There is, therefore, a discrepancy in techniques of walking that are heavily gendered. The training required for a female model results in a walk that is highly exaggerated and stylized and which deviates radically from 'normal' styles of walking. Female models often have to walk in very high heels that already change the gait of the body, a 'technique of the body' that Mauss (1973) describes, and the current aesthetic is for an exaggerated 'strut' that pronounces the lift of the legs and involves planting one foot directly in front of the other rather than in front of its own hip socket. The overall effect generates a very distinct bounce that is an over-blown parody of a walk in a way that would be inappropriate for men.

Male models' catwalk has none of these obvious affectations; it is 'casual', even 'slouchy'. It is as if the men have simply wandered off the street and onto the catwalk by accident, but it is only 'natural' in so far as it replicates techniques of walking men practice off the runway, techniques learned from childhood (Mauss, 1969). Male models' walk appears to disavow or distance itself from the performance; it does not call attention to the men as objects of display and does not offend normative definitions of masculinity. Indeed, Parker, a 24-year-old New York model, explicitly linked masculinity to his catwalk performance: 'Just walk like a man, just walk like yourself. For guys it's very different than girls. Girls have to learn to walk. Guys just walk with confidence.'

It would seem, so far, that the practices involved in being a female and male model conform to normative heterosexuality: women are decorated, done up, and made to feel more pressure in terms of how their bodies are assessed, and are expected to exaggerate their performances or 'drag up' the elements of display and exaggerate femininity as display for others. They are schooled and overloaded with codes of femininity, what Borgerson and Rhen (2004) refer to as 'excesses', that the female body is inherently lacking, requiring supplements to create the feminine which is always an incomplete final state.

Male models, in both interviews with us and in their day-to-day negotiation of castings and jobs, follow gendered scripts so as to appear uninterested in things largely defined as feminine. In this case, they align themselves with heteronormative expectations and perform hegemonic masculinity.

Performing the Self

Women have long performed 'emotional labour' in service industries, using their gender and (hetero)sexuality to increase company profits by flattering and flirting with (male) customers (Hochschild, 1983). In fashion, such labour is expected of male models as well. All models, especially new models, spend considerable time selling themselves to clients at highly competitive castings. Mears and Finlay (2005) describe routine work-days in which women models engage in 'strategic friendliness' with clients and bookers, channel their 'energy', and suppress their true feelings in order to get hired. Wissinger (2007a, 2007b) similarly describes models' strategies to feign enthusiasm and affect on the job. Selling the self involves producing an energetic, upbeat version of oneself that 'connects' to bookers and clients: warm smile, solid

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eye contact, and manufacturing the persona of *genuine* niceness. Models exploit their good looks and sexuality by flirting to charm clients, as with one young model in London, who was observed during a casting audition for a cosmetics campaign. When the client, a good-looking young man, asked where she was from, she replied blithely, 'From Russia, with love!' and winked at him, knees bending in a flirtatious courtesy.

Charm takes a distinctive form for the male model. Male models are frequently objects of homosexual desire both in front and behind the camera, chosen and styled by the large preponderance of gay men, often destined for fashion magazines, such as *Attitude*, *L'Uomo*, which have significant gay male readerships. As objects of homoerotic desire on a daily basis in their working lives, male models learn they can increase their chances by the strategic performances of (homo)sexuality. As one London model put it, the aim is 'to make the clients fancy you'. Inevitably this involves flirting with male as well as female clients, either 'queering' their performance, or emphasizing heterosexuality. He demonstrated how he performs for clients at castings depending on their gender: with women he strikes a confident pose and behaves in typically 'manly' ways - firm handshake (the researcher's hand was shook) and confident stare (head up, chin back). Male clients, he notes, are likely to be gay and for these encounters he resorts to a stereotypically 'camp' performance - 'effeminate' voice and 'limp wrist' - all of which he performed during the interview.

This is widespread practice for straight male models, who admit flirting with gay clients. As Ian, 25, put it:

I just give some gay persons, you know, like a smile or something to let them think something. ... It's just to give them a little bit of hope, you know. I don't ignore them. I play with them, because in life you have to seduce people, especially in castings.

This performance defies expectations of masculinity. Modelling entails male models go 'gay for pay', which Escoffier (2003) has found to be widespread in the adult film industry, where straight men 'play gay' in higher-paying gay sex scenes. 'Gay-for-pay' in fashion means strategically performing a homosexual identity at castings, which one booker in New York explained: 'I feel that the male models know how to – not that the male models *sleep* with clients – but they know how to use it. Flirtation is a fact to their advantage.'

Indeed, a young male model in London explained having to adapt his previously homophobic disposition, common in his hometown in North London. He jumped up during the interview and, with a puffed out chest and tough-guy walk, pretended to enter a casting studio, explaining, 'I used to be one of these like toughguys, like "I ain't getting changed in here in front of these gay bastards!"' Two years into modelling, he explained that he no longer gets uncomfortable around gay men. He continued:

I had to adapt in a way, that I had to let them flirt with me, and I had to be quite a flirtatious boy. ... So now I've changed; basically, I started treating gay people same as I would treat normal straight guys.

No one teaches the male model this art of suggestion; he learns it on his own.

As Ryan put it, 'it's common sense', and 'everybody does it'. It often takes <https://assignbuster.com/gender-performativity-in-modelling-and-drag-queens/>

the form of 'playing along'; for instance, Ethan passively let a gay client flirt with him at a party. This is the opposite strategy of gay men in other types of women's work, such as teachers and nurses, who, in the face of homophobia and pressure to hide their sexual orientation, play up hegemonic masculinity (Williams, 1995). While sexuality and specifically heteronormativity are built into norms in most occupations, we see this inverted for male models, and such expectations are built into their workplace encounters and even in leisure spaces such as at parties.

Of course, not all male models are heterosexual but, barring just one self-identified gay man of the models in our sample, the men openly declared their heterosexuality during the interviews, typically without being asked. Indeed, they seemed acutely aware that their work is thought to be 'feminine' and that they are assumed to be gay, and thus, like this London model, they set the record straight:

Most people think models are gay, but not at all, a lot of male models are really big lads, if you know what I mean: they want to go out and get laid and whatever. This is where people misinterpret it. Lots of the bookers and stylists and photographers are the gay ones, it's not the models. (Gary, 22)

During interviews, the majority of the models relied on clichéd performances of heteronormative masculinity, enacting their sexual desire with declarations that they were in the industry 'for the girls' or by describing their girlfriends and sexual relationships. A few models used homophobic comments as a way of positioning themselves as heterosexual. These

performative enactments enable the model to situate himself on the 'right' (i. e. normative) side of the sexuality divide. These comments are themselves performative; made to ensure no misconception on our part that they were gay, and to frame the interview as a normative heterosexual encounter. Further, the models sometimes became flirtatious during the interview and with female models in the agency. Indeed, the most common performance by London models was distinctly 'laddish' in style (Gill, 2003):

slouchy, jokey, irreverent, including sexual references and jokes. As these examples highlight, heterosexuality and homosexuality are 'worn' on the body, very much like drag, through gestures and behaviour in work interactions.

In contrast to their laddish performances 'off the clock', these men are frequently called upon by photographers to exude homoerotic appeal on photo-shoots. As one model put it, 'photographers want you to give them sex, sex, sex' because 'sex sells' commodities. In a curious extension of Simon de Beauvoir's famous denouncement, men, as well as women, are 'the sex' in this context. Since photographers can be very influential in promoting a new model, it makes sense to win them over by being sexy and flirtatious. The aim is, as one model put it, to 'keep them guessing' as to their sexuality. These men are realistic about the work and its erotic content, and they are not afraid of the gay gaze. In this way, male modelling 'queers' normative definitions of masculinity by confounding the conventions and expectations of dominant heterosexual masculinity. It is an occupation that challenges conventional notions of work and of what a 'real man' should do.

However, the heightened sexuality of modelling work frequently spills over to become something of an occupational hazard: stories of the 'casting couch' were frequently told, with models on the receiving end of unwanted sexual advances from photographers and stylists while on photo-shoots, and, in one case in our sample, from a model's booker. Nearly every model saw such encounters as an occupational hazard; most male models told of unwanted sexual advances from gaymen, either first-hand accounts or stories of friends' ordeals.

The ways in which male models say they handle these encounters further illustrated differently modulated performances of masculinity engendered by this work. In interviews models recounted stories of how they had been 'felt up' by stylists while dressing, or asked to strip down, or wear revealing clothes by the stylist or photographer. One model on a shoot with a male photographer was asked to make himself semi-erect. The unequal power relations between model and client mean that models have to handle such situations carefully if the model is to continue working. A commonly used strategy is to over-perform heterosexuality. One London model describes how 'I make or pretend to make an imaginary phone call to my mates: "yeah I got laid last night, gorgeous bird", and then they get the message'.

Tellingly, such stories were largely absent in women's discourses of modelling work. Contrary to popular depictions of fashion models as the heterosexual objects of predatory male clients, as was recently portrayed in the documentary *Picture Me* co-produced by model Sarah Ziff (2009; see also Gross, 1995), women were less likely than men to recount stories of sexual advances by clients. This too may be indicative of gender performativity on <https://assignbuster.com/gender-performativity-in-modelling-and-drag-queens/>

two levels. First, in an industry over-represented with gaymen, it may be that more male models than women experience come-ons. Second, it is also likely that female models may not report or even recognize sexual advances by men, given the ubiquity of sexual harassment women on any job are likely to face (see MacKinnon, 1987).

In any given context, argues R. W. Connell (2005), 'hegemonic masculinity' is culturally exalted over subordinated masculinities and all femininities. Gay men rank near the bottom of the gender order, on par with femininity. However, within fashion, this power structure is reversed, with women and gay men in positions of influence. This rearranges the structure of gender and sexual power relations for male models. Within modelling, the male fashion model occupies one of the lowest positions, with little power or influence vis-à-vis these powerful gay men and their more revered female counterparts. They must rely upon their bodily efforts and performances, which by heteronormative standards, are 'queered', oriented towards a feminized, sexualized, often homosexual workplace. Thus, in polar opposite ways that women can achieve 'emphasized' femininity via modelling, these men find their work identity at odds with normative hetero-masculinity. And yet, as the men's performances suggest, while male modelling challenges normative definitions of masculinity, this can be reclaimed by over-performing heterosexuality.

Conclusion

As the professional 'doing' of multiple types of femininities and masculinities, fashion modelling presents an empirical comparative analysis of

gender performativity in one occupation. We have examined two different
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levels of 'work' in modelling where gender differences are apparent – the monitoring and careful presentation of bodies – and, secondly, performances of the body/self to 'charm' clients. In each, we find a rich gender gradient in models' expectations, behaviour, and subjective understandings.

We suggest that the everyday work of male modelling opens up partial challenges to normative definitions of gender within the reiterative possibilities of gender performativity, specifically by 'queering' it, firstly through the ways in which these men are invested in their body and, secondly, through the performances they enact at work. However, rather than heralding a dramatic shift in notions of gender, the opening up of non-traditional occupations to men and women produces differently modulated gender performances in such spaces of work. This counter-balances the overt determinism of gender performativity, as well as demonstrating, through empirical observation, how open to 'play' normative gendered scripts can be, not just within the supposedly 'radical' and 'alternative' spaces of drag. As our research demonstrates, and Lloyd (1999) argues, the de-naturalizing of gender effectively extends to all forms of 'dressing up', and models' 'parodic proliferation' defies the idea of two essential genders and desires. Indeed, they demonstrate how 'one "is" never straight or queer, merely in a condition of "doing" straightness or queerness' (Lloyd, 1999: 197).

In sum, our case study of models reveals subtle differences and nuanced ways of 'doing gender' that cannot be accessed through discourse analysis alone. Our empirical setting reveals small contrasts in the ways of 'doing' gender that suggest how gender performativity, while largely reiterative of normative heterosexuality, may subtly confound the conventions. Thus, the <https://assignbuster.com/gender-performativity-in-modelling-and-drag-queens/>

performances of female and male models – predicated as they are on the performativity of gender – testify to the resilience of normative heterosexuality, while also demonstrating some of the ways in which the scripts might be challenged. Ultimately, the concept of gender performativity should be understood as locally emergent and contextual. In this empirical application of gender performativity, we find context to be crucial in shaping specific meanings of gendered acts.

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