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Discorsi, metodi e pratiche di diversità, equità, inclusione
e senso di appartenenza: verso un quadro condiviso globale

*Edited by
Fadia Nordtveit and Paola Catenaccio*

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Bonding Queer Icon

A Multimodal Analysis of the NYC DragCon 2019

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ABSTRACT

The word ‘icon’ usually refers to a symbol, a famous person admired by all, or a religious image used for worship. Twentieth and twenty-first century icons are also sacred images of secular societies that help construct collective identities and delineate the zeitgeist. Places can also be considered icons if looked through social semiotic lenses. Through Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and O’Toole’s (1990; 1994; 2004) re-conceptualisations of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (1994) and the concept of Bonding Icons (Stenglin 2008a; 2008b; 2012), this paper investigates the ways in which the New York City DragCon 2019 became a rallying and bonding place that both abstractly, through its website, and concretely, through the actual event, gave people a sense of belonging. The main goal of the study is to underline the extent to which the rallying and bonding is money-driven and to highlight the ties between consumerism and the concept of ‘icons selling icons’.

Keywords: belonging; bonding; drag; icon; multimodality; sociolinguistics.

1. FROM RuPAUL TO DRAGCON VIA DRAG RACE

This article investigates the dynamics of belonging at play in drag-culture related events and promotional materials. As the common denominator is the art of drag, it is fundamental to provide a clear understanding of the word ‘drag’ and the characteristics that differentiate this art form from the other contexts in which stereotyped female clothes are used as either to express one’s art or one’s identity. Baker (2002, 112) provided three meanings for this word:

1. clothing typical of one sex or gender worn by the opposite sex or gender. However, drag can often be much more than clothing, and reflects a mental, emotional or sexual state of being. Some transgendered¹ people have pointed out that the real ‘drag’ is to have to wear the clothing that is socially expected of them. 2. any clothing not worn by the speaker in their everyday life. ‘Have you seen David in all his butch uniform drag? I wonder where he’ll put his handbag?’ 3. an acronym of *Dressed as a girl*.

More recently, however,

The nomenclature of ‘drag queen’ (typically performance where gay men dress as women) and ‘drag king’ (typically performance where lesbian women dress as men) took hold, alongside a rich tradition of trans and gender non-binary performers doing drag using both these and other labels (Grace and Halberstam, 1997), as well as cisgender women performing as drag queens. (McCormack and Wignall 2022, 5)

In this regard, Barrett (1999) identified five major groups of people who share similar performative activities: transsexuals², transvestites³, cross-dressers⁴, female impersonators, and drag queens. The reasons for their cross-dressing allow a clear-cut distinction between them. Drag queens are used to performing in front of a live audience embodying female characters and accentuating the culturally specific stereotypes of cisgendered women. Around these characters and personas members and supporters congregate, building communities of belonging based on the assumption that “drag is an artform dependent on language (i.e., in presentation of a drag character, mouthing words during lip-sync musical performances, hosting shows, interacting with members of the audience, etc.)” (McCleary 2024, 140). This research, however, assumes that meaning in the drag art form is also conveyed through the employed in-group slang⁵ and proxemics, hence its focus on multimodality.

Having briefly clarified this point, it is possible to introduce the TV show and the related convention through which RuPaul has been popu-

¹ The word transgender is preferred, as ‘transgendered’ emphasises the act of becoming or an on-going process instead of merely describing a gender identity.

² The term ‘transgender’ is currently preferred.

³ As this term is currently considered derogatory, this research distances from its employment.

⁴ Due to sociocultural developments, this term could also be considered derogatory according to the context of use.

⁵ Baker (2002), Ranzato (2012), and McCleary (2024) provide a non-exhaustive list of studies on the matter.

larising drag culture. RuPaul Andre Charles, also known as RuPaul, was born in San Diego in 1960. He is mostly known for his drag character, the TV programme *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which he has been hosting since 2009 and the corresponding drag convention, DragCon, which debuted in 2015. Although the *RuPaul's Drag Race* format has slightly changed over the years, the programme always features a group of drag queens competing against each other so as to gain the title of America's next drag superstar. The DragCon convention, for its part, has been supporting the drag economy by retaining and bonding its audience around the concepts of pop culture, LGBTQIA+ rights, the drag art, and also consumerism. Through such a massive platform, they do not merely convey ideas and values about the LGBTQIA+ community⁶, but they also disseminate one of the fundamental values of contemporary capitalistic societies: consumerism. In other words, glocalisation (Stenglin 2012, 123), through transnational media organisations⁷, moulds social identities and practices in the interest of capitalism, which does not merely exploit pink economy⁸ (Wharton 1997) but the purchasing power of all individuals who support and are part of the community. In doing so, they are able to create a global identity and bolster diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB hereafter), all of which, in fact, mask a thinly veiled capitalistic desire. Since the concepts of social responsibility and social identity heavily shape contemporary corporate choices, this paper conceives customers as contributing to companies' DEIB initiatives.

In this paper, the extent to which DEIB strategies are employed to reach the intended audience/customer is analysed, together with the subsequent tension that is created between belonging and commercial goals. As part of a two-pronged strategy, the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* creates a sense of belonging at an ideological level, while the DragCon physically aggregates people who are lured into becoming part of the community by exploiting their purchasing power. This research analyses the New York City DragCon 2019 in both its abstract and physical forms, and as a social product that has successfully managed to create ties between drag culture and consumerism through the feeling of belonging accorded to its attendees.

⁶ Or 'communities', depending on the theoretical approach applied (Leap and Boellstorff 2004).

⁷ WOW Presents+, which is the official streaming platform of Drag Race related products.

⁸ The purchasing power of the LGBTQIA+ community.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study analyses the way in which DEIB constructs are both projected and exploited in the semiotically complex multimodal artefact of the New York City DragCon 2019. The composite nature of the phenomenon under investigation calls for an all-round approach to which multiple theoretical frameworks contribute, all of which provide valuable perspectives that bear on the choice of the methodological approaches selected, as outlined below.

Since the materials to be analysed comprise both the website of the event and the actual on-site convention, and because of their distinct meaning-making processes, the decision to employ the theoretical frameworks and methodologies described below stemmed from the need to consider both the abstract and the concrete parts of the multisemiotic mode under investigation, through which queer individuals (predominantly but not exclusively) interact in both digitalised and physical contexts.

Owing to the characteristics of the object of analysis, therefore, a multimodal approach has been applied. Considering that the term ‘multimodality’ can be described as “the different ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resources systems are both co-deployed and co-contextualised in the making of a text-specific meaning” (Baldry and Thibault 2006), the aim of this research is to investigate the specificities of the analysed multimodal text and unveil putative underlying interests hidden behind meticulously constructed facades. Chiew Arthur Kok Kom’s perspective of the hypertext (2004, 131-162), instead, was essential to understand the way ergodists⁹ (Fei 2024, 220-246) are presented and understand digital meaning structures. As for the analysis of the physical convention, this study has resorted to Blommaert’s concept of Linguistic Landscape Studies (LLS hereafter) (2013). LLS analyse the interconnection between languages and societies in order to investigate the way they change according to time, space, and bodies.

The intersections of business and DEIB is investigated by using two theoretical frameworks: a queer theory approach (de Lauretis 1990), and Mieli (1977) and Alexander’s perspectives on capitalism (2015, 97-120). Both Mieli and Alexander focus on the ways through which capitalism incorporates non-normative identities and desires in order to reproduce itself, questioning the economic stakes that queer visibility

⁹ People interacting with the hypertext.

serves for the optimal functioning of global capitalism. Considering contemporary screen representations, breakthroughs in matter of queer visibility cannot go unnoticed, despite the ever-presence of disparities and inequalities in the film industry. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, for instance, can be considered as one of the most productive industries that create queer icons with whom viewers can identify with. Although the presence of non-normative gender and sexual identities, practices, and performances in mainstream media could be seen as a social improvement, social semioticians underline that “any form of representation can never be fully inclusive because of the backgrounding or erasure of some elements or participants in order to foreground others” (Fairclough 1995). In addition, “the more we recognise the affective burdens between commodities, consumers, and their identity, the more likely it is that we gain critical distance from the dictates of commodity relations” (Penney 2014, 110). It is the aim of this research to uncover the backgrounded interests and strategies of the Drag Race firm by problematising the ties between multimodal queer representations and consumerism. The foundations of the research are to be found in the concept of ‘Bonding Icon’ theorised by Stenglin (2008a; 2008b; 2012).

2.1. *Bonding Icon*

If “it is within speech communities that identity, ideology and agency are actualized in society” (Morgan 2014, 2), and considering the still present controversies in matter of LGBTQIA+ rights¹⁰, the importance of communities of belonging for queer individuals is enhanced. Furthermore, recent explorations of interpersonal meaning in 3D spaces have led to the theorisation of two social semiotic tools known as ‘Bonding’ and ‘Binding’ (Stenglin 2008a; 2008b; 2012). While Bonding focuses on affiliation, Binding organises spaces according to a security-insecurity scale. The latter is composed of two extremes: extreme closure and extreme openness, which convey specific interpersonal meanings to users of a place. Neither an overly closed place (too bound), nor an overly open one (too unbound) is likely to convey a sense of security to users because of their respective claustrophobic and agoraphobic effects.

¹⁰ The Zan draft bill has yet to be approved by the Italian Parliament, the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill has been hampered in the UK, and the proposal of putting a ban to drag shows has recently raised criticisms in America.

Therefore, median choices are more likely to produce a feeling of security and freedom. In this middle section, the Binding scale can be graded into strongly, moderately, and weakly 'bound' or 'unbound'.

Bonding, instead, can build togetherness, inclusiveness, and solidarity via several resources such as Bonding Icons, hybridisation, and iconisation. While hybridisation refers to value-transfer and iconisation concerns the creation of ties between a symbol and a specific meaning through a literal and abstract field,

Bonding icons are evocative symbols of social belonging that draw people into shared communities. They are multi-dimensional in nature and can constitute a range of things:

- **buildings** like the Scientia at the University of New South Wales (see Ravelli and Stenglin, 2008 for an analysis of the Scientia as a Bonding icon);
- **paintings** like the Mona Lisa (see Stenglin and Djonov, 2010);
- **symbols** like the Olympic torch (see Stenglin, 2008a for an analysis of the Bonding icons of Olympism and how they become emotionally 'charged'). (Stenglin 2012, 127)

The fundamental characteristic of Bonding Icons is that they symbiotically fuse Halliday's ideational and interpersonal meanings (Stenglin 2012, 128). While ideational meaning is explored through the register variable of 'Field' (Halliday 1978; 1994), the system of 'Attitude' in appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005) is used to analyse interpersonal meaning due to the relevance of emotions in negotiating Bonding. Quoting Stenglin (2012):

Attitude comprises three sub-systems: Affect, Judgment and Appreciation. Affect deals with positive and negative emotions such as love/hate, dis/satisfaction and in/security. It is important to bonding because sharing of Affect created empathy and collective stance around such feelings, while the sharing of Judgment aligns people around moral and social attitudes, and shared Appreciation invites people into a shared stance around aesthetics.

The interconnection between ideational and interpersonal meaning in the semiotic tool of Bonding Icon can be further understood through the concept of coupling introduced by Martin (2000) and supported by Zhao (2010; 2011) and Zappavigna (2008).

Coupling concerns the temporal relation of 'with': variable x comes with variable y. To put it another way, it is the relation formed between two semiotic elements at one given point in time within the logogenetic timeframe.

Coupling can be formed between metafunctional variables (e.g. ideational and interpersonal), between different semiotic resources (e.g. image and verbiage) and across strata (e.g. semantics and phonology). (Zhao 2011, 144)

Logogenesis, in this case, refers to “the ongoing way meaning is created through the unfolding of a text” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004, 43). In order to become part of a community, therefore, people also have to share similar personal evaluations besides objects and habits. In the present case, DragCon can be seen as a Bonding Icon that materialises the properties that have been conveyed on its website and through the reality TV show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. In this context, drag queens can be referred to as ‘icons selling icons’ because they do not merely sell concrete objects but representations around which people might affiliate, which are not exempt from consumerism and marketing practices. Given the multimodal and multilayered properties of the analysed two-pronged product, Systemic Functional Linguistics¹¹ (SFL hereafter) was deemed suitable to reveal the functioning of the employed semiotic systems and their underlying intents due to its power of conceptualising the relationships between people and semiosis.

3. METHODOLOGIES

The two main methodologies that support this study are ‘the grammar of visual design’ elaborated by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and the ‘language of displayed art’ theorised by O’Toole (1994). Both of them are recontextualizations and adaptations of the SFL approach elaborated by Halliday (1994), which conceives of language as a social semiotic system.

Shifting from the linguistic to the visual level, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) maintained that images conveyed as much (if not more) meaning as languages. Their approach adapts the same metafunctions theorised by Halliday (1978; 1994) to the analysis of the visual. In the grammar

¹¹ According to Halliday (1978; 1994), the social and situational environment in which a text unfolds (the context of situation) can be analysed according to the parameters of Field (the topics of a text), Tenor (the participants), and Mode (the channel of communication). The three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), which are connected to the aforementioned parameters, may help understand language use. A deeper description of Halliday’s model is beyond the scope of this article.

of visual design, the representational and interactive metafunctions are found, while Halliday's textual metafunction is replaced by a more aptly named (given the nature of the semiotic materials considered), compositional metafunction. Whilst in Halliday's model (1978; 1994) the three metafunctions are realised at the level of the clause via transitivity, mood and modality, and theme structure, in Kress and van Leeuwen's model the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions have their own specific characteristics. Their in-depth description, however, goes beyond the scope of this paper, and relevant aspects will only be referred to and discussed when functional to the analysis.

Places are additional non-linguistics semiotic resources that can be used in isolation or combined to convey messages (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 21). O'Toole adapted Halliday's model to the analysis of architectural structures, theorising the grammar of architecture (1994). In his model, the use and the characteristics of buildings are not merely determined by what in Halliday's words (1978; 1994) could be defined as their ideational metafunction, i.e. their arguably most basic function as buildings designed for a given purpose, be it (for example) residential or commercial. The ways and purposes for interacting with places are also determined by their interpersonal and textual characteristics because, similarly to clauses, they are composed of different types of processes and participants.

Any semiotic text, in whatever medium, will represent some aspect of our experience of the world, the Experiential or Ideational Function; it will manifest certain features of the relationship between the text's producer and its receiver(s) and the producer's attitude to the experiential content, the Interpersonal Function; and it will have the structural characteristics of a well-formed text of the appropriate genre, the Textual Function. (O'Toole 1990)

Thus, a building meant to host a commercial enterprise will be designed in such a (recognisable) way as to facilitate the processes entailed in the realisation of the transactions meant to occur in such place, and which involve multiple cohorts of people with different roles. This in turn means that the building – any building – is a locus where relationships are assumed, or formed (between people, but also between people and the building itself), and where the physical organisation of the place enables or inhibits certain relationships or interactions, depending on the purpose of the building. Consequently, the experiential, interpersonal, and textual (or compositional) metafunctions are equally fundamental for buildings to be meaningfully and socially usable.

4. THE DRAGCON A AND DRAGCON B CORPORA AND RESULTS

The reasoning behind the compilation of the present corpus derives from the international success that the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise (represented in this study by the New York City DragCon 2019 in both its website and convention forms) has gained over the years both inside (Edgar 2011; Moore 2013; Strings and Bui 2013; Goldmark 2015; Brennan 2017) and outside the academia. Two sub-corpora thus characterise the present study: DragCon A and DragCon B, whose splitting was deemed necessary due to their differing data. Sub-corpus DragCon A consists of the DragCon website¹², whose several semiotic resources require multiple lenses in order to be understood. This sub-corpus constitutes, in Maree Stenglin's theory (2012), the abstract part of the Bonding Icon concept. The actual DragCon event, instead, represents the concrete part of the Bonding Icon concept, whose multimodal analysis will ensure a better understanding of this phenomenon, its bonding power, and its economics-oriented approach. Sub-corpus DragCon B, therefore, is composed of four maps that depict its spatial organisation. On the webpage of the Javits Convention Center, the building in which the DragCon under analysis was organised, it is possible to virtually access to its four floors. The DragCon website, instead, featured an overview and a floor map of the New York City DragCon 2019 to showcase the booths' locations. In addition, the website ExpoFP created a RuPaul's New York City DragCon 2019 3D floor plan integrating the map of the building with the spatial organization of the analysed event¹³. By applying the Bonding Icon concept to this second sub-corpus, it was possible to investigate the way through which the bonding messages launched on the website were reinforced at the in-person event. Notwithstanding the different methodologies, Maree Stenglin's concept (2008a; 2008b; 2012) should be considered as the common thread of this research, providing it with its *raison d'être*.

¹² Whose frequent updates prevent this research from featuring visual references for the provided examples. Nonetheless, its latest version is accessible at: <https://www.rupaulsdragcon.com/>.

¹³ Accessible at: <https://expofp.com/venue-image/javits-center/rupaul-s-dragcon-2019.jpg> [25/06/2024].

5. DRAGCON A ANALYSIS

As it constitutes the abstract part of the two-sided concept of Bonding Icon, the DragCon A sub-corpus is analysed first. Since homepages represent the entrance door to all the websites, the starting point for the present research was the investigation of the DragCon homepage, whose analysis was conducted from the global to the local level, that is, by looking at the 'lexia' (page) level and then focusing on single 'items' (elements of a webpage) (Chiew 2004). Moreover, since websites are frequently updated and modified, it is important to mention that this research only focuses on the DragCon website as it appeared in 2019. In-line data commentaries thus provide descriptions for each analysed segment of the website for ease of reading.

5.1. *Analysis at the lexia level*

The word 'RuPaulsDragCon' represents the masthead of the webpage. By mimicking the typical structure of commercial and institutional/organisational webpages, this strategy was employed to remind viewers of the name of the event, refer to a hierarchical structure, and convey veracity and truthfulness to viewers. However, due to both its multimodal properties and placement on the webpage (Chiew 2004, 131-162), the viewers' gaze was easily redirected to a video placed underneath. It is thus essential to consider the meanings it conveys. In this item, intersemiosis is created between sliding images and the two words 'London' and 'Los Angeles'. The concept of 'space of interaction' included in the Multi-Semiotic Model (IMM) elaborated by Fei (2004, 222) was fundamental for its analysis. Thanks to this concept, it was possible to determine that the two semiotic modalities intertwine establishing contextualising relations, which, in turn, lead to intersemiosis. More specifically, the two elements are connected through a co-contextualising relation, as they support the creation of a single meaning. In other words, the exciting experiences featured in the video can also be achieved by viewers if they buy a ticket to one of the two advertised events. As the video sold an abstract experience, their advertising campaign was simultaneously adapted. Instead of exerting leverage on a marketing strategy characterised by low prices, web creators relied on the power of images to arouse viewers' imagination. Resuming the notion of Bonding Icon (Stenglin 2008a; 2008b; 2012), this multimodal text creates an abstract

sense of belonging and affiliation so as to encourage viewers visiting the event.

The second multisemiotic item underneath the masthead portrayed the arrival of two drag queens on the pink carpet of a previous DragCon while surrounded by an enormous crowd. In this case, the compositional characteristics (its bigger font) of the verbal element 'RuPaul's Drag Race is coming to the UK!' granted it more prominence. By being characterised by re-contextualised relations, the two semiotic levels of this section aimed at highlighting an event that was going to happen. On an interpersonal level, instead, they bolstered similarities between DragCon events (which was possible because of its global proportions) granting it its Bonding Icon properties.

Language was also used as a bonding tool. As Stenglin underlined (2008a; 2008b; 2012), it is not sufficient for a Bonding Icon to rely on its ideational meaning, but it is necessary to exploit interpersonal meaning to unite people. Since languages also feature interpersonal meaning, the employment of certain expressions on the website is not accidental. In smaller font sizes, several sentences featured Modern English Queer Slang words (Baker 2002), attracting the attention of both community members and outsiders. The word 'sashaying', for instance, which was employed on the TV show and replicated on the website, was used to emphasise people's belonging and membership through the common knowledge of the in-group slang language. Words such as 'goops', 'gags' and 'sickening' contributed to convey the same bonding effect. Since the previous words are peculiar to the LGBTQIA+ slang vocabulary, the website could be perceived as excluding cisgender and heterosexual people. However, this would have prevented DragCon from capitalising on novel attendees; the sentences in which these words appeared were therefore in smaller fonts, as to somewhat background them, while the clickable 'Get my tickets' box – aimed at all potential visitors regardless of their gender identity – received more prominence. While the first were intended for already loyal members, the second element was designed as a generic message to attract new people and boost profits.

5.2. Analysis at the items level

Two elements recurred on the different website pages: the video at the top and the 'exhibit' section at the bottom. As the video appeared on almost every page, it constituted the leitmotif of the website. Its

repetition (and the semiotic power of images) conveys a global and unaltered image of DragCon which, regardless of the place, will always offer attendees the same breathtaking experience. The multimodal properties of videos, which have greater interpersonal power due to the coexistence of semiotic resources, explain its placement and frequency on the website. The 'exhibit' section, instead, did not receive the same relevance due to its placement in the lower part of the webpage, which always receives less emphasis (Chiew 2004, 131-162), and because of its targeted addressees. While the main target of the website was ordinary people, this section specifically addressed companies and brands that were considering collaborating in the creation of drag-related events. Through successful collaborations, profits and reputations of both companies are enhanced. Although money is the most important aspect for companies, their economic interests are usually hidden behind more benevolent goals, which explains the compositional reasons for granting this section less emphasis than a video showcasing a joyful group of people.

According to their compositional organisation, the body of both the 'London' and 'Los Angeles' sections featured multisemiotic boxes in which images and written messages overlapped. In the 'Main Stage' box, apart from the possessive pronoun 'your' that interpersonally addressed and engaged viewers, the word 'sissy' received more prominence by being used as the first word of the sentence in which it was featured (Wang 2007). Since it is commonly used in this speaking community as a verb to encourage people walking proudly, it targeted members of the community and bonded them together through the employment of a reclaimed term and a common slang, also removing linguistic and cultural barriers.

The two pages also conveyed the message that DragCon is a safe place for children (as children could participate in the 'Kids Fashion Show'), thus bringing the LGBTQIA+ community and the concept of family closer. Due to the still contemporary controversies on child adoptions by same-sex couples, the website contributed to the debate and depicted the company as socio-politically engaged. Since children are not required to pay an entrance fee, the company did not aim at turning a profit but was trying to improve the daily lives of LGBTQIA+ people. However, due to the fact that children must be accompanied by at least one adult, children's participation inevitably implies adults' participation, which equals profit.

The lexia of the UK event, conversely, was characterised by small adjustments in order to adapt it to the new country without drastically

changing its aspect, which would have made it lose its global reach and influence. Firstly, the colours of the logo were changed from violet, red, and orange to blue, red, and light blue, recalling the colour scheme of the Union Jack. Moreover, since the event was held in London, web creators also added 'UK' and '2020' to the original logo. In this way, they inserted the event in the city and the city in the event, following LLS perspectives (Blommaert 2012), combining familiar and unfamiliar elements so as to attract new customers without intimidating them. The same strategy was also used for the creation of the pins that *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* contestants can obtain on the show. As this object was placed in the 'VIP' section beside a written message that explained the perks of buying a VIP ticket, this compositional strategy associated excellent drag queens with the status that VIP attendees would acquire if they purchased this ticket. Attendees are thus ideologically connected to drag queens because of the proximity of these two elements, and physically closer because of 'exclusive VIP-only experiences' and 'priority access to panels'. In other words, this strategy encouraged people splurging to enhance their feeling of belonging and bonding with drag artists.

At an abstract and ideological level, DragCon resorted to a two-fold strategy to combine its two main interests: creating a community of belonging and turning a profit. Language is an excellent means to define a person's inclusion or exclusion from a community and words can be strategically chosen and used to reach a specific goal (Austin 1962). This was achieved on the DragCon website by resorting to drag-related expressions and catchphrases. Through their use, DragCon directly addressed its keener members, reinforcing their feeling of belonging. However, using the same language does not always lead to the establishment of solid communities, as people's evaluations are also essential. If it is true that in recent years many misconceptions about the LGBTQIA+ community have been eradicated, thereby allowing this convention to become a global phenomenon, the same prejudices could not have been erased without the existence of this event; it is a circular process that has helped the improvement of living standards and the unification of social communities in one place – DragCon. Economic interests, however, always play an important role. As has been noted, the website also attracted non-members by stimulating their curiosity with images and captivating words while focusing their attention on buying items. Similarly, the relevance accorded to sponsorships, partnerships, and other moneymaking drag events serves an analogous purpose.

6. DRAGCON B ANALYSIS

In order to examine the concrete part of this Bonding Icon and achieve a global understanding, it is necessary to focus on the NYC DragCon event that took place from 6th to 8th September 2019 at the Javits Convention Center. The Javits Convention Center, or Javits Center, is a four-storey conference centre situated on the Eleventh Avenue in Manhattan, which hosts different events such as the New York Comic Con, the New York International Auto Show, and also DragCon. Due to the building's size, conventions only take place in specific sections, allowing people to attend events while also shopping at the other featured stores. This spatial organisation benefits both the conference facility and the events that it hosts, as attendees have more opportunities to use their purchasing power. On the one hand, it emotionally improves people's experience, on the other, it economically exploits them in several ways, which also occurred during DragCon.

In fact, this convention was held in the 3D and 3B halls on the third floor, while the other rooms, halls, and floors remained unmodified, allowing drag fans to buy a coffee at Starbucks or a new book at Hudson booksellers, both on the second floor. As in order to enter the halls in which DragCon was held people had to use the building's connectors and navigate the building, the Javits Convention Center also capitalised on DragCon attendees via its additional shops. However, this was not the only obligatory step, as they also had to stop to one of the two registration desks to identify themselves and pass security checks, which consisted of getting through a metal detector machine and bag checks. According to the social semiotic tool of Binding (Stenglin 2008b, 53), these two steps can be considered procedures during which people feel strongly 'Bound' (*ibid.*) because they cannot freely move but have to follow specific instructions and orders to proceed.

If DragCon was imagined as a boundless and unrestricted place in which people could freely express themselves, these first two steps contradicted this claim. Nevertheless, this highly binding step helps to boost the weakly binding properties of the internal section, i.e. the actual convention. Therefore, apart from being a standard and common operating procedure, it can also be considered as an interpersonal procedure that conveys a specific meaning to the directly engaged people. In other words, these initial checks increased the freedom and carefreeness with which people experienced the rally, as after having realised that all people

were controlled, the perception of this convention as a secure place and their emotional bond probably increased.

After the security checks, it was possible to enter one of the two halls in which DragCon was held, the 3B hall. Apart from an info point positioned on the left, many dining options, and two gender neutral restrooms, the main elements were the booths. Firstly, by comparing the total number of booths shown in the 'Exhibitor list' and the number of booths in which it was possible to meet a RuPaul queen, an enormous discrepancy can be noticed. In fact, only 76 of the 227 exhibitors were queens' booths, while the other 151 featured shops that gained their own spot in the convention because of previous partnership agreements. While in a drag gathering more space may be expected to be devoted to queens and talents, a significant number of Drag Con exhibitors were occupied by brands that exploited this opportunity to reach a greater audience and increase their revenue. Therefore, its initial support of social causes and its promoted playful and light-hearted atmosphere were dismissed in favour of business interests, as the featured brands certainly paid a sum of money in order to obtain a spot in the convention.

If one considers that drag queens also sell their brand and their image (not merely printed on several pieces of merchandise) due to their 'icons selling icons' properties, their main aim can be described as both economically and emotionally driven by the same community of belonging they help to create. Moreover, the show fact sheet attested that booths did not have the same 10' × 10' size, but some of them were bigger while others were smaller, such as the artist alley tabletop booths. At the entrance to the event, in fact, the 20' × 20' 'RuPaul's DragCon merch' and the 'RuPauls: Essential' booths welcomed attendees. Because of their dimension and positioning, which in O'Toole's model corresponds to a texture characteristic (1994, 11-27), they were given more relevance, which in turn conveys positive interpersonal meaning according to the same methodology. As can be inferred, the placement of objects in real places is not randomly chosen but strategically predetermined in order to convey a specific meaning. Therefore, an additional graphic map (included in the references) outlining the dimensions of every single element that was featured in the convention was also used.

As the show fact sheet remarks, "Your booth does not come carpeted. If you would like to further enhance the appearance of your booth, we offer rental carpet in a variety of colours" (n.d.), leaving drag queens the option to decorate their boot. As decorativeness is an element that interpersonally attracts people's attention (O'Toole 1994, 11-27),

the need for drag queens to welcome people in colourful and decorated booths becomes self-explanatory. The concept of ‘icons selling icons’ fully materialises in their booths, in which drag queens sell (besides their merchandise) their image embodied in one look as an instrument that, in interpersonally and ideationally bonding people together, becomes a Bonding Icon. It is through their looks that they manage to create their own fanbase around which people congregate sharing similar tastes, thoughts, judgments, and appreciations of their favourite drag queen. It follows that the Bonding Icon properties of DragCon did not merely derive from its sections, its material elements, or its placement, but were heavily depended on the drag queens that participate to the convention, as it is mainly because of them (and especially their image) if this convention has gained its worldwide success.

The pink carpet on which drag queens entered the convention was nicknamed ‘Glamazon Boulevard’, and other sections were also given creative names. As if it was a city made of streets and alleyways that pedestrians needed to recognise in order to properly navigate the place, certain paths and sections of this DragCon were also called ‘Backrooms Boulevard’, ‘Death Drop Alley’, ‘Stacy Layne Lane’, ‘Sickening Street’ and ‘Werq the World Way’, strengthening the ties between the physical place and attendees’ emotional connection. Since names are not randomly given, the meaning of the expressions employed also contributed to emotionally and interpersonally intertwining people and places. In fact, as happened on the website, these names creatively borrowed words and expressions from the slang employed on the TV show, making knowledge of Modern English Queer Slang a fundamental prerequisite for a real immersive experience¹⁴.

Elements that further bolstered people’s connection with this event were the ‘Wet n’ Wild’ contest, the ‘Lip sync for your life’ competition, and the ‘Kids Fashion Show’. Stenglin (2008b, 57) claimed that “The social interaction involving the objects in the Park aims at exploring shared experience – an important choice for connecting with visitors. It is also significant at another level: hands-on learning aligns people into practically oriented communities. Communities aligned around doing”, which also characterised the three contests. Their common feature, in fact, is that they physically engaged people, enhanced their participation,

¹⁴ Following LLS tenets, places and languages are intrinsically interconnected, therefore, the degree of familiarity and bonding with the context is directly correlated to the external elements a person is able to recognise.

and created more bonding among attendees and between drag fans and the convention, thus concretising Stenglin's claim. By gaining more knowledge on makeup, clothes, and wigs, participants, contestants, and spectators interacted, shared the same experience, and created a stronger interpersonal connection. This real-life experience, more than ideas and thoughts, materially gave people a sense of belonging. In the same way, 'Photo Ops' provided attendees with the possibility to increase their interpersonal connection with the place through the employment of memes and photos, allowing them to interact with both the environment surrounding them and other attendees.

The 3D hall, instead, only featured three elements: two panel rooms, and the VIP lounge. If people's interest in an event is already attested by the amount of money they are willing to spend to participate, the possibility of accessing a private room reserved for VIP members can only increase positive feelings and boost the interpersonal ties with the convention. As regards the two panel rooms, their interpersonal strength derives from their ability to gather attendees and allow them to directly talk to their favourite drag queens.

Emphasising the extent to which languages, semiotic resources, and places are connected was one of the main goals of this research. In order to reinforce the latter point, an additional drag-related example taken from the analysed DragCon can be provided. During a radio interview for Radio Andy, one of the three American interviewers affirmed that he had learnt some new words from the UK contestants, such as 'minge' and 'slag', which are mainly part of the UK drag vocabulary. As can be understood, English and American drag queens resort to different words to express similar concepts; therefore, when the American audience was introduced to English drag artists, they also learnt a new slang. As a result, if it is true that "RuPaul's DragCon is sashaying across the pond to London for the FIRST TIME EVER!" (DragCon website, n.d.), portions of the English drag art are also influencing the American drag language, as language and places always intertwine.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research has tried to bypass the frivolous and glamorous appearance of DragCon to explore its business-like core and understand the strategies through which it has managed to acquire global influence, without

becoming a gated place for the LGBTQIA+ community, but rather succeeding in being an inclusive event. Through a focus on its DEIB constructs, this paper has provided some explanations to the power of DragCon in conveying inclusion and belonging to its attendees through a vast array of semiotic resources, transforming it into a fully-fledged Bonding Queer Icon. Through the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, DragCon has managed to acquire popularity and a global reach and following. However, a Bonding Icon is not merely determined by its popularity but also by its power in gathering people around mutual appreciations and joint tastes, eventually leading to the creation of communities of belonging. The main aims of this study was to contribute to the understanding of this concept by exploring and further enriching it through the concept of Bonding Queer Icons.

Due to its worldwide reputation and its power of bonding people together, DragCon can be considered as a fully-fledged Bonding Queer Icon that, in removing the binarism between heterosexuality and homosexuality, always welcomes new members. If, on one hand, it constructs discourses of belonging that lead to the creation of a united global identity, on the other, it increases its profits making consumerism one of its focal points. As far as the construction of a global identity is concerned, its global influence may lead to capitalistic appropriation. However, given the size of the corpus under scrutiny, a direct link between the global identity established by this Bonding Queer Icon and this notion cannot be definitively established. More studies need to confirm and verify this hypothesis. Additionally, by discussing the semiotic power of places in creating and conveying meaning, and delving into selected aspects of the interconnection between languages and places, the studies has contributed to an understanding of how semiotic signs were used in the creation and marketing of the event.

In conclusion, this study has shown that an alternative approach to the DEIB concept and a deeper focus on belonging can help enhance both internal and external structures of initiatives of the kind described in this paper by implementing Bonding Icon properties. This construct might hold much promise for future research and should find more widespread application in DEIB studies and beyond.

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