# "Building a thick skin for each other"

## The use of 'reading' as an interactional practice of mock impoliteness in drag queen backstage talk

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Although queer linguistics has long acknowledged the playful use of potentially impolite utterances by LGBT people to build in-group solidarity, these practices have not been analyzed from a sociopragmatic approach, nor have they been mentioned in the general pragmatics literature. Responding to these two gaps, the present study examines the functional use of the interactional practice 'reading' in the backstage talk of four drag queen performers. By employing a mock impoliteness analytical framework (Haugh & Bousfield 2012), this study shows how these utterances, which could potentially be evaluated as genuine impoliteness outside of the appropriate context, are positively evaluated by in-group members who recognize the importance of "building a thick skin" to face a hostile environment from LGBT and non-LGBT people. This study also seeks to draw attention to the use of backstage talk, and supplemental interview data, to uncover drag queen cultural practices through language use.

**Keywords:** mock impoliteness, drag queen performance, 'reading,' rapport-management, discourse analysis

### 1. Introduction

Within the field of impoliteness an important distinction has been made between potentially impolite talk and conduct that is evaluated negatively, i.e. genuine impoliteness, or positively, i.e. mock impoliteness, by conversational participants (Culpeper 1996, 2011). The latter involves the positive evaluation of talk and conduct as being an allowable offense that supports interpersonal relationships under the appropriate contextual conditions (Haugh & Bousfield 2012). This evaluation can arise from several interactional practices, such as banter (Culpeper 1996, Grainger 2004, Haugh 2011, Leech 1983), jocular abuse, face-threatening acts and mockery (Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Maíz-Arévalo 2015, Sinkeviciute 2014), ritual

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insults (Crowly 2007, Kochman 1983, Labov 1972a, Murphy 2017) and teasing (Haugh 2010, Holmes 2006, Lampert & Ervin-Tripp 2006).

Although studies on communication styles of LGBT people have long acknowledged the use of interactional practices such as playful putdowns (Jones 2007), ritual insults (Murray 1979, Perez 2011), and teasing (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000) to humorously build in-group solidarity, the use of these practices by LGBT people has not been mentioned in the mock impoliteness literature; furthermore, a detailed pragmatic analysis of how these potentially impolite utterances can be positively evaluated by LGBT people has not been conducted.

Therefore, the present study responds to both gaps in the literature by examining how the interactional practice of 'reading,' i.e. a humorous and creative comment about a true aspect of the target (Johnson 1995, Jones 2007, Stanley 1970), is used in spontaneous conversation within a sub-culture of gay men: drag queens. Although the queer theory literature has extensively studied the social implications and reasons for performing drag (e.g. Butler 1990, Taylor & Rupp 2004), it has only been recently that researchers have begun to study drag queens beyond the performance (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz, Belgrave & Halberstein 2007, Hopkins 2004, Taylor & Rupp 2003), including their use of language (Barrett 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, Mann 2011, Simmons 2014).

In order to show how reading may be used within a local drag queen community I analyze the backstage talk of four drag performance through a sociopragmatic approach of mock impoliteness (Haugh & Bousfield 2012), while also taking into consideration the show director's conceptualization of this practice that emerged from a semi-structured interview. With nearly three hours of recorded backstage talk, I will demonstrate how potentially impolite utterances based on a self-conscious characteristic of the target are ultimately evaluated in a positive light to achieve the function of what I call 'building a thick skin' for one another, in order to face a hostile world outside their community (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007). By doing so, I seek to highlight the importance of analyzing backstage talk, in conjunction with interview data, to uncover how language use is shaped by cultural practices of the drag queen community.

## 2. Contextualizing the drag queen sub-culture

Within the larger LGBT community, drag queens form a sub-culture of gay males who impersonate and perform as women but do not want to permanently have a woman's body (Taylor & Rupp 2004). Frequently, these performers showcase their temporary male-to-female transformation during live events that can range from amateur to professional performances, depending on their experience and

status (Berkowitz et al. 2007). To date, research on drag queen performance has focused on the expression of gender, racial and sexual identities and their social implications (Butler 1990, Schacht & Underwood 2004, Taylor & Rupp 2004), their representation in popular media (Daems 2014, Edgar 2011, Kirk 2004), the use of multiple linguistic styles and codes (Barrett 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, Mann 2011), and how the performer's personal experiences reflect drag culture (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007, Hopkins 2004, Simmons 2014, Taylor & Rupp 2003). As this study seeks to analyze how linguistic interactional practices shape and reflect the culture of drag queens the following sections will focus on the personal experiences of drag queens and their linguistic code.

### 2.1 The socialization and personal experiences of drag queens

Although scholars have explored many facets of drag queen performance, not much has been conducted on drag queen socialization, with the notable exception of Hopkins (2004). Primarily drawing from informal, semi-structured interviews with fifteen drag queens this researcher outlined two important steps for aspiring queens: the initial public presentation and the creation of a drag persona. The initial public presentation can take place in a variety of contexts that range from costume contests and masquerade balls to amateur drag nights and competitions at local gay bars, with the latter two contexts typically involving a higher degree of scrutiny from both audience members and other drag queens alike. The exposure gained from subsequent events can help queens obtain bookings in clubs and bars, an important step towards establishing a larger presence in the local community. The other main challenge for new queens is to invent a drag persona, which involves the creation of the performance persona in addition to learning to how apply makeup and create outfits.

Since these initial steps are often challenging for new queens Hopkins (2004) notes that one option is to seek out a 'drag mother,' i.e. a more veteran performer who can mentor the aspiring the queen in all aspects of drag culture and performance. If a drag mother takes on multiple daughters then a resulting 'drag family' can emerge as a larger familial unit that can provide each other with creative, emotional and even financial support. However, these arrangements can be viewed as a double-edged sword in that "one can often get to the top more quickly and easily […] but may never achieve the same degree of respect that an autonomous individual would at the same level" (Hopkins 2004: 146), although queens frequently become more independent once they are better established. However, whether these performers participate in familial units or not, a strong sense of community emerges from friendships with other drag queens and it has been noted that this is an important characteristic of this sub-culture (Simmons 2014).

These emotional support systems, whether they are with family members or other queens, may help aspiring queens, especially in the face of intense scrutiny and judgment as they are becoming established. More specifically, Hopkins (2004) writes:

> Queens often relate a common story that when they debuted, they were ridiculed and denigrated based on their stage names, shows, and appearance (most claim that they looked very unconvincing, or "booger," when they started) […] Most female impersonators are extremely self-conscious, especially in the initial stages of their career, and often these insults can prove fatal to their long-term goals.
> (Hopkins 2004: 146–147)

Although queens may eventually craft and perfect their art to the point where they gain a celebrity status in their local community this hostile environment towards drag queens does not go away (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007). Furthermore, even though they may learn how to handle these impolite comments during the performance this may not necessarily transfer to situations offstage where they are confronted with ridicule, harassment and even physical violence.

Additionally, researchers have documented the contradictory status of being both marginalized and a celebrity that comes with being a drag queen (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007). For example, marginalization has been reported in the difficulty of finding romantic partners once a performer reveals her persona to the potential love interest, to a general perceived sense of segregation within the larger gay community, which may be supported by a recent finding that gay men who hold hypermasculine attitudes ascribed negatively valenced characteristics to drag queens (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe & Specht 2014);[1] as noted by Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010), some drag queens may internally cope with these experiences of marginalization through drugs and alcohol.

In addition to these personal responses to marginalization, Berkowitz and Belgrave (2010) also report that two of their eighteen Miami Beach drag queens recounted instances where they verbally challenged attempts of marginalization with their own insults; Sharon reported that she responds to rude comments with equally rude ones while Gina described how one night she exchanged insults with five men outside of a club. Although only a small portion of their participants mentioned that they have verbally fought back in the face of harassment it would be interesting to examine how this verbal skill is learned during the socialization process, in addition to being sharpened through practice, which is the focus of the present study.

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1. As is common practice, drag queens will be referred to using feminine pronouns in this paper.

## 2.2 The drag queen linguistic code

To date, the majority of research on the language used by drag queens has focused on their style and code mixing (Barrett 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, Mann 2011) and using language to uncover cultural values (Simmons 2014), which is the area of this study. For example, by analyzing the language used by contestants of the fourth season of the popular reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* Simmons (2014: 645) proposes eight cultural codes that are "[the] qualities and characteristics of communication that a queen must perform, uphold, and repeat in order to uphold drag family values, thus fulfilling the code of love, respect, and dignity that comes with the performance of drag." This is to say, Simmons (2014) argues that by examining the language use of drag queens researchers will be able to uncover communicative practices and patterns that can better add to our understanding of drag queen culture; Mann (2011: 809) also echoes this sentiment by writing "language is a vital cultural artifact; therefore, gaining an understanding of drag queens' use of language is crucial, if social scientists aim to explore the community, the culture and the art of drag."

Therefore, this paper will investigate the language used by drag queens in order to better understand the cultural and communicative practices of this local community. More specifically, the present study will examine data collected from a semi-structured interview with the show director of a local gay bar and nearly three hours of recorded backstage talk collected before and during a drag performance at this gay bar. As was noted by Taylor and Rupp (2003), the backstage, or 'dressing room,' it is often a difficult site for researchers to gain access; currently, there is only one study on drag queens which has included an analysis of talk from this intimate setting (Taylor & Rupp 2003), while the majority of previous research has drawn from the actual drag performance (Barrett 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, Mann 2011), participant observations in gay bars/clubs (Barrett 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007, Hopkins 2004), interviews with drag queens (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007, Hopkins 2004) and popular media (Simmons 2014). The advantage of using backstage talk to analyze drag queen language is that it may be able to provide us with an opportunity to examine how interpersonal relationships are managed in this more private setting, especially since when performers enter backstage they can "drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (Goffman 1959: 112), in addition to how language is used when the spotlight is not shining on them.

## 3. Mock impoliteness and interactional practices

### 3.1 Conceptualizations of mock impoliteness

Similar to politeness theory (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987, Kádár & Haugh 2013, and the references therein) and impoliteness theory (e.g. Culpeper 2011, and the references therein), several conceptualizations of mock impoliteness have been proposed by scholars working in the area (Culpeper 1996, 2011, Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Leech 1983). In order to ground this paper in a theoretical framework the data for the present study will be analyzed through the sociopragmatic approach to mock impoliteness proposed by Haugh and Bousfield:

> Mock impoliteness in interaction involves evaluations of talk or conduct that are potentially open to evaluation as impolite by at least one of the participants in the interaction, and/or as non-impolite by at least two participants […] In multi-party interactions where there are three or more participants, in contrast, not all of the participants need necessarily evaluate the talk or conduct as non-impolite. Indeed the target, or any participants sympathising with the target, may actually (covertly or overtly) evaluate the talk or conduct as impolite. In such situations, however, there is considerable pressure on the target to treat the talk or conduct as non-impolite even if (non-displayed or private) evaluations of impoliteness arise in the minds of one or more of the participants. This potential slippage between evaluations of the talk or conduct as non-impolite and impolite is what lies at the very heart, we argue, of mock impoliteness. (Haugh & Bousfield 2012: 1103)

Said another way, mock impoliteness involves the positive evaluation of verbal, i.e. talk, and non-verbal, i.e. conduct, of an allowable offense directed at a target as supportive of interpersonal relationships; moreover, mock impoliteness is evaluated in a continuous, dynamic and cumulative fashion within interaction that takes into account contextual cues such as the setting, the relationships between the participants, intentionality, etc., and therefore what may be considered non-impolite in one context may be considered impolite in another.

From this conceptualization of mock impoliteness there are three key components that should be highlighted for the purposes of the present study: (1) the separation of verbal and non-verbal practices from evaluations of mock impoliteness that allows for the possibility of genuine impoliteness evaluations; (2) how the interplay between talk, conduct and context may pressure evaluations of mock impoliteness; (3) the multi-functionality of mock impoliteness and its possibility to express true feelings.

As is detailed in Haugh and Bousfield (2012), previous conceptualizations of mock impoliteness (Culpeper 1996, Leech 1983) have often conflated interactional practices that may give rise to mock impoliteness, e.g. banter, with evaluations

of mock impoliteness; this is to say, previous research has implied or stated that by performing these interactional practices that conversational participants are performing mock impoliteness for the purpose of solidarity-building. However, there exists the duality that interactional practices such as banter and ritual insults may be evaluated as mock impoliteness by some conversational participants while others may interpret the same (non-)verbal behavior as genuine impoliteness.[2] For this reason, it is important to first analyze utterances for their possible genuine impoliteness interpretation and then examine possible cues that participants have not taken offense to the utterance, but rather have positively evaluated it as supportive of interpersonal relationships.

Although potentially impolite utterances are continuously evaluated, there is evidence that cultural norms, values and ethos may promote, if not predispose, certain types of talk and conduct to favor evaluations of mock impoliteness. For example, a pair of recent studies on mock impoliteness in Australian English has explored its relation to cultural ethos of 'not taking yourself too seriously,' finding that when participants violate this ethos other participants may playfully call out this violation, with the talk and conduct ultimately being evaluated as mock impoliteness (Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Sinkeviciute 2014). Additionally, the interactional practice may contribute to the context in itself, as in the case of ritual insults in African American English (Labov 1972a), which prototypically follow a rhyming pattern composed of an obviously untrue insult directed towards a third-person referent related to the target; in fact, Labov (1972a) notes that when the ritual insults deviate from this pattern, e.g. factual statements and more personalized references towards the target, that they can be evaluated as personal insults, i.e. genuine impoliteness, again highlighting the importance of separating talk and conduct from evaluations due to the slippery slope between mock and genuine impoliteness.

Related to the ritual insults in Labov (1972a), other early conceptualizations of mock impoliteness proposed that mock impoliteness utterances were intended to be untrue and remain on the surface (Culpeper 1996, Leech 1983). For example, in his analysis of mock impoliteness, Leech (1983) proposed that speakers can

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**2.** For genuine impoliteness, I use Culpeper's (2011: 23) conceptualization of impoliteness: "a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered impolite – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they out to be." This definition takes a socio-cognitive approach to impoliteness that addresses theoretical issues raised with previous conceptualizations of impoliteness, such as its applicability to non-Western cultures and the roles of speaker intentionality and hearer evaluations.

show solidarity with their interlocutors with utterances that are obviously untrue and impolite. Culpeper (1996) expanded Leech's conceptualization by claiming that mock impoliteness builds solidarity by keeping impoliteness on the surface thereby avoiding genuine offense, a claim that has since been questioned (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997, Mills 2003). Although the primary function of building solidarity has long been acknowledged by researchers in the area, Culpeper's (2011) most recent definition of mock impoliteness also includes two additional functions, which Haugh and Bousfield (2012) argue arise from the blurry line between mock and genuine impoliteness evaluations of the same event: cloaked coercion, i.e. the use of interactional practices to influence the actions of others, and exploitative entertainment, i.e. the use of interactional practices that involve pain for the target for the entertainment of others.

While it will be shown that the interactional practice of reading may function to reinforce in-group solidarity and provide exploitative entertainment, it will also be shown that the primary function of this interactional practice is to verbally arm members to combat instances of genuine impoliteness outside of the drag queen community, which makes the use of factual statements for its ammunition a fundamental aspect of this practice.

## 3.2 Interactional practices of LBGT people and evaluations of mock impoliteness

As was alluded to in the previous subsection there are several interactional practices that can lead to evaluations of mock impoliteness, such as banter (Culpeper 1996, Grainger 2004, Haugh 2011, Leech 1983), jocular abuse, face-threatening acts and mockery (Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Maíz-Arévalo 2015, Sinkeviciute 2014), ritual insults (Crowly 2007, Kochman 1983, Labov 1972a, Murphy 2017) and teasing (Haugh 2010, Holmes 2006, Lampert & Ervin-Tripp 2006). While these studies have frequently been discussed in the literature of mock impoliteness this field has largely ignored these same interactional practices used by LGBT people. For example, scholars have noted the use of playful putdowns (Jones 2007), ritual insults (Murray 1979, Perez 2011) and teasing (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000), in addition to the gay culture specific practice of 'reading' and its non-verbal counterpart 'throwing shade' (Johnson 1995, Jones 2007). This lack of acknowledgement is especially surprising if we take into consideration the similarities between the interactional practices used in the LGBT community with the trends established by the mock impoliteness literature, such as a competitive spirit between verbal jousters (Johnson 1995, Jones 2007, Murray 1979), exploitive humor (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000, Murray 1979, Perez 2011),

solidarity-building and in-group identity display (Jones 2007, Perez 2011) and the potential for mock impoliteness to slip into genuine impoliteness territory (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000, Jones 2007).

However, these practices are not simply mirror reflections of how they are used and function in other speech communities, but rather they show their own innovations. For example, frequent topics that are used in these interactional practices are related to the visibility of gayness (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000, Murray 1979), sexual roles in relationships (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000, Murray 1979) and sexual promiscuity (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000, Jones 2007). Although these topics did appear in backstage talk, more relevant for this study is the observation made by Murray (1979) in which the author notes that members of 'doubly damned' communities, i.e. minority groups within the gay community, may be more likely to engage in ritual insults than other groups:

> [They] are likely to encounter degrading remarks made by other gay men as well as those made by participants in the dominant culture. A sharp tongue is a weapon honed through frequent use, and is a survival skill for those who function outside genteel circles […] such [in-group] play is quite literally, self-defense.
> (Murray 1979: 218–219)

Murray's observation calls attention to the training aspect of in-group members in the verbal arts to later use in self-defense when confronted with the hostile dominant culture; the present study will explore this sharpening of tongues in the backstage talk of a 'doubly damned' group, drag queens, with the specific verbal interactional practice of reading.

Despite being a well-known practice in popular culture, 'reading' has various definitions in the scholarly literature. For example, one of its earliest academic references can be found in Stanley (1970: 52), who noted that urban and small-town gay males had different definitions of the practice, "to put someone down, to let someone have it verbally" or "to understand, to see through someone," respectively. A more detailed exploration of the practice can be found in Johnson (1995: 125), who defined the practice as "set[ting] them straight, to put them in their place, or to reveal a secret about someone in front of others in an indirect way – usually in a way that embarrasses a third party." The only other academic article to explicitly define reading can be found in the appendix of Jones (2007: 83), who claims that it involves "confronting someone with witty and creative language that serves to cut or put someone down." As can be seen from these definitions, there is an element of genuine impoliteness present in these definitions, which is why Johnson (1995) differentiates between a serious mode and a non-serious mode, with the latter being further divided into 'cracking someone's face,' i.e. commenting on an

external characteristic such as physical appearance, and 'calling someone out,' i.e. commenting on inherent characteristics such as personality.

Taking into consideration the previous literature on mock impoliteness and interactional practices, I will propose that reading, i.e. a particular type of talk, is an in-group interactional practice of a local drag queen community that is used to build a thick skin for members; consequently, the topics used during reading sessions should contain an element of truth. Moreover, I will argue that reading may be predisposed to evaluations of mock impoliteness in the context of the backstage, since in-group members recognize the interactional goal of the practice. However, I will also demonstrate that if the same comment were to be made by out-group members outside of the backstage that an evaluation of genuine impoliteness may be more likely.

## 4. Method

In this section, I present the study's methodology, which could be considered short-term, moderate participation observation (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002); data collection took place over three days (short-term) at which time I was present at the research site, identified as a researcher and occasionally, but not actively, participated in the scene. Furthermore, I only had peripheral membership with this group of drag queens, as I am a gay male but not a drag queen performer.

Following DeWalt and DeWalt (2002), I first established rapport with the show director of a gay bar, Eva Franco, in order to gain access to the community.[3] To begin the line of communication, I first e-mailed Eva to see if it would be possible to conduct a research project on 'drag queens and language.' Eva was immediately responsive to the project and invited my colleague, Travis, and myself to an amateur drag show she was hosting to further discuss the project. During this initial encounter we conversed with Eva and observed her in both the backstage and the front stage while she interacted with the bar patrons. After leaving the bar, Travis and I sat down together to type our field notes from this encounter.

It was during that first encounter that Eva invited us to not only video-record an upcoming holiday show performance, but also to audio-record backstage interactions before and during the performance. Originally, we had only planned on video-recording the drag performance but Eva's invitation to the safe space of the dressing room (Simmons 2014) opened up the opportunity to analyze drag queen backstage talk. During the night of the drag performance, Travis and I gained

3. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the research setting and its participants.

access to the dressing room fifty-five minutes before the show and we were able to stay through the entire performance. In total, nearly three hours of talk was transcribed according to the conventions detailed in the appendix.[4]

The final source of data comes from an open-ended, semi-structured interview with Eva that took place six months after the drag performance. Taking into account the themes that emerged from the transcripts I used an interview guide that included questions related to Eva's role as the show director, her relationship with the other performers, the history of the local drag queen community and a discussion of drag queen terminology. Relevant portions of this interview will be included in the results section, but they will appear in quotations instead of the transcription conventions used for backstage talk.

## 4.1 The research site and its participants

The research site for this study was a gay bar in a mid-sized, Midwestern college town, where Eva hosts weekly amateur drag queen shows as well as professional performances that bring in veteran performers from the local, state and national levels.

The bar has one small stage that is slightly raised from the rest of the dance floor. After their performances the drag queens leave the stage and turn to the left to enter the backstage, a small room hidden to the bar patrons by a large divider. The back stage has two small desks and a large one for the performers; Eva uses one of the small desks as her personal dressing area off in the right back corner of the room and the others are assigned the remaining desks. In addition to the door with access to the front stage, there is also a door that is connected to the coatroom and an emergency exit door that leads to the bar's patio.

The four performers for the special holiday drag performance, Eva Franco, Melinda Noelle, Monique G. Knowles and Uma Sword, were the "house queens" of this particular bar, meaning that they are regular performers. In addition to the drag performers and the research team there were other people who came in and out of the backstage over the course of the night, including Eva's "dresser," i.e. someone who assists the queens backstage, James, Monique's dresser, Jeff, and Eva's backup dancers, Robyn and Chris.

Eva Franco is the show director of the bar and the evening's hostess. As a hostess, her duties include: (a) to introduce the individual performers; (b) to provide

4. The 55 minutes of pre-show talk contained 1,222 turns while the remaining two hours of during show talk only contained 1,238 turns, indicating more interaction in the pre-show talk.

banter with the audience between acts; (c) to be the headline performer of the show (Mann 2011). Eva has the physical appearance of a tall, larger build of a Hispanic-American woman and she has been performing drag for ten years.

Melinda Noelle is the most veteran drag performer of the four, having won the state's Miss Gay contest in the 1990s. She is a white American who is short in stature with a large build. Of all of the drag performers, she was the most vocal during the backstage talk, taking more turns than any other performer. She has been performing drag for about seventeen years.

Monique G. Knowles is an African American performer who is well known in the local gay community for her energetic performances. She is one of the younger drag queens in both age and experience as she has only been performing drag for about five years. Backstage she frequently sung and hummed to herself and she was always the quickest performer to get ready, even though she had some elaborate outfits.

Finally, Uma Sword is a tall, thin, blond white American, who also is the least-experienced performer, as she only began performing drag two years ago. At the beginning of taping the backstage talk, Uma was not present but arrived twenty minutes later. Unlike the other three performers who live and work in the college town, Uma lives, works and mainly performs in a larger city in the same state.

## 4.2 Data analysis

This study will be using Haugh and Bousfield's (2012) framework for the analysis of mock impoliteness. As was mentioned in the literature review, there are two steps when analyzing potential cases of mock impoliteness: (1) the identification of potentially impolite talk or conduct and (2) indications from conversational participants that this talk or conduct as has been evaluated as "non-impolite," i.e. an allowable offense that is neither impolite nor polite.

For the identification of potentially impolite talk I searched for the use of conventionalized impoliteness formulae (Culpeper 2011), i.e. linguistic expressions that frequently occur in contexts that are evaluated as impoliteness. Although it is acknowledged that the use of conventionalized impoliteness formulae does not guarantee the evaluation of either mock or genuine impoliteness these formulae have frequently been found to be used with mock impoliteness (Bernal 2008, Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Stenström & Jörgensen 2008). Table 1 provides Culpeper's (2011: 135) formulae for each type of conventionalized impoliteness found in the present study, along with examples from the backstage talk.

**Table 1.** Examples of conventionalized impoliteness from Culpeper (2011) and the present study

| Conventional impoliteness formulae category | Formulae | Examples from backstage talk |
|---|---|---|
| Personalized negative assertion | [you] [fucking/rotten/fat/etc.] [moron/fuck/slut/etc.] | "*you're fat and gross*" (Example 4)<br>"*you don't make any sense*" (Example 5) |
| Personalized negative vocative | [you] [are] [so/such a] [shit/bitch/ugly/etc.] | "*you dumb bitch*" (Example 4) |
| Personalized negative reference | [your] [stinking/little] [mouth/body/hands] | "*your eye makeup's horrible and your face is fat*" (Example 7) |
| Pointed criticism | [that/this/it] [is/was] [absolutely/unspeakably/etc.] [bad/crap/terrible] | "*nobody likes your act either*" (Example 5)<br>"*I don't think you know anything about makeup yourself*" (Example 7) |
| Condescension | [that] ['s/is being] [babyish/childish/etc.] | "*buddy, but we still keep you on*" (Example 5) |
| Unpalatable question and/or presupposition | Why are you trying to make my life impossible?<br>Which lie are you telling me? | "*how many slugs did you mother for that hair?*" (Example 6)<br>"*you can hardly see the stains on your costume*" (Example 6) |

To analyze the potentially impolite interpretation of these formulae I used Culpeper's (2011) application of Spencer-Oatey's (2002, 2005, 2008) "rapport management," a framework used to analyze the management of social relations. Within this framework there is a division between the management of "face," i.e. "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (Goffman 1967: 5) or others assume that s/he has, and "sociality rights," i.e. the social entitlements participants claim in interactions. Although there are three subcomponents of face and two subcomponents of sociality rights in Spencer-Oatey's model, I shall only focus on two subcomponents of face: quality face and social identity face.

Quality face is concerned with the management of personal characteristics that one claims for him or herself, e.g. personal appearance and competence, while social identity face is concerned with the individual's management of group characteristics which the collective has deemed to be positively valued (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 2005, 2008); this is to say, the key difference between quality and social identity face is that former is defined at a personal level while the latter is defined at the group level and that all members of the group are assumed to have these characteristics.

Therefore, when analyzing to see if a particular comment has enhanced (politeness) or violated (impoliteness) a drag queen's social identity face it is imperative to have a discussion of what a community of drag queens values. For example, if drag queens value the personal appearance of their members, then comments made towards a drag queen not looking beautiful would violate that queen's social identity because it would imply that they do not embody positively valued characteristics of the group. However, if a comment were directed towards a drag queen's weight it would violate their quality face since thinness is not a characteristic positively (or negatively) held by the group, but rather is individually valued. This is to say, if potentially impolite talk is made in reference to a characteristic that is only found while in drag then this would be an attack of social identity face, while if the talk makes reference to a characteristic that can be found in and out of drag, i.e. in the male self, then it would be an attack on quality face.

To analyze the conversational participants' evaluations of talk, cues such as laughter (Haugh & Bousfield 2012) "unusual vocalizations, singsong voice, formulaic utterances, elongated vowels" (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig & Monarch 1998: 1233) and cooperative discourse mechanisms found in gay men's English (Leap 1996) were taken as indications that participants were orientating themselves to achieving mock impoliteness. Although recent research has suggested that the use of gestures may be crucial in the differentiation of mock and genuine impoliteness (Haugh & Bousfield 2012, McKinnon & Prieto 2014), only the talk of the participants will be analyzed, since only audio recordings were obtained backstage; future research should also take into account the role of gestures that could be captured through the use of video.

## 5. Results

Before the presentation of the results, it would be beneficial to discuss the observer's paradox (Labov 1972b), i.e. if the data obtained were affected by the presence of the research team. At the end of my interview I asked Eva if the talk we recorded was representative of what happens backstage:

(1) ***Eva**: Yep. Especially since you were there you even got to see the part Melinda probably tried to sexually harass you. Ummm.*
***Sean**: Yeah she did [laughs]*
***Eva**: Ok, well then. SO, yeah so you got the full [emphasis] experience. Um, and that's Melinda, I mean that's real. I mean, what we did that night is not…was very real. I mean we didn't…we're not actors, you know? And to be honest with you, most of the time we all forgot you were there.*

Eva went on to explain that sometimes they even forget that their dressers are backstage with them, providing me with a humorous anecdote of when she screamed out for her dresser who was actually standing right behind her. Although there is always the possibility that Eva provided me with an answer that she thought I wanted to hear, upon reviewing the transcripts and taking into consideration what she said I have no reason to believe that the talk obtained backstage is not a representative sample of what happens in this setting.

### 5.1 Eva's conceptualization of 'reading'

At about the halfway point of my interview with Eva, I asked her about a particular stretch of talk (Example 4, p. 117–119) that I thought would be a possible candidate for mock impoliteness. What followed was a discussion of the back-and-forth nature of backstage talk, which evolved into a discussion of the interactional practice of reading:

(2) ***Eva**: And so that's another thing, we all feed off of each other in the back. And that's the bad and the best thing about being in the backroom of a drag show. You have to be quick witted. You have [emphasis] to know, or they're going to shut you down. I mean you have to be able to like come, and be…there or you're done. Or you won't say anything [emphasis] all night.*

Eva describes that the back-and-forth nature of backstage talk is part of the drag queen culture in this setting. Furthermore, she notes the necessity of being both skilled in dishing out these comments and receiving them as well: "*when you're in the back room you just have to be able to take it, and you have to be able to give it*." This observation also provides us with an indication that upon entering the backstage one must submit herself to participate in the practice, possibly creating pressure to interpret these utterances as non-impolite since there is an understanding that everyone is required to participate and that everyone is a potential target.

The notion of an "allowable offense," a crucial component of Haugh and Bousfield's (2012) conceptualization of mock impoliteness, is highlighted in Eva's response to the researcher's inquiry about if these utterances involve genuine impoliteness, i.e. "*are these insults personal attacks?*":

(3) ***Eva**: No, no, no. Sometimes, they pick…so reading, is not about being mean and awful. Reading is about finding something that you know the other person is kind of self-conscious about, and picking on that. In a playful way. Not in like, in like this, I'm going to say "why is your nostril so weird?," you know? Like, you know what I mean? And so, that's what's reading is, it's never meant to be mean.*

On my list of drag queen terminology questions I had planned on asking Eva about reading towards the end of the interview, however she brought the term up herself. According to Eva, reading involves commenting on another's characteristic, which you know they are somewhat self-conscious about, while maintaining a playful spirit. Eva went on to later define two aspects that help maintain the playful, non-serious nature of reading, creativity and humor: *"and it's supposed to be funny, reading is supposed to be funny and creative. And that's the thing, it's not like "oh girl well you're a bitch and you're ugly," that's not reading, that's just being rude."* These two characteristics have been observed as important with other interactional practices, such as ritual insults (Labov 1972a), as well as previous definitions of reading (Jones 2007).

However, another important aspect of reading is that it involves commenting on something that is true about the other person. This differs from previous descriptions of banter (Culpeper 1996, Leech 1983) and ritual insults (Labov 1972a); in fact, Labov (1972a) noted that true statements made during the verbal word play could spiral into an exchange of genuine insults, meaning that the first true statement triggers an evaluation of genuine impoliteness. This is to say, reading differs from Labov's (1972a) notion of ritual insults in that, despite using true comments, reading can still can be positively evaluated as mock impoliteness while with ritual insults an evaluation of genuine impoliteness is more likely.

The notion of commenting on something that is true about the target while reading was again brought up by Eva when we were discussing throwing shade:

(4) ***Eva**: So reading, is about the verbal. You know…it's "oh ok girl." It's about somebody telling someone something they already know…and so, that's why it's not mean. You're just, letting them know that you [emphasis] know, that they know, you know? Like, if someone's like, eyes are too close together, you say something like "oh girl, is it hard for you to see?" Or like, "nice hair, hope you win."*

During the interview, I was very interested in probing why these potentially impolite utterances were frequently viewed as an allowable offense and evaluated as mock impoliteness. Since I knew that one of the functions of mock impoliteness was related to in-group solidarity I decided to ask her if this was one of the functions:

(5) ***Eva**: It kind of is [related to in-group solidarity], it's also…to be honest with you, I think it's also a form of [long pause] building a thick skin. We do it to each other, in jest, because somebody, because we're going to enter this world, where we're over feminized as people, over feminized quote unquote. Um. I always say that we're idolized and ostracized. Like people love drag queens, and they're like, "Oh, I wanna, she's so amazing, da, da da," but then you turn around…and when you're not the drag queen anymore you're ostracized for being too feminine, or you're*

*ostracized for being (emphasis) a drag queen, um. And those types of things, and so. I mean. And so I think that's where (emphasis) this comes from, is that we're going to end up…getting this type of…you know, hate, from our own (emphasis) community…in a way that is not (emphasis) fun. And so I think it's a part of building a thick skin for each other.*

While Eva does tentatively agree that reading can be used to maintain and strengthen interpersonal relationships she offers a more practical reason for this interactional practice: building a thick skin for in-group members. As has been found in previous research (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007), Eva confirms the drag queen perception that they carry the contradictory status of being a celebrity and an outcast in the larger gay community; while they may reap the rewards of being a celebrity at the same time they face hostility in the form of verbal assaults and insults from some members of the gay community, in addition to these practices and slurs from outside the gay community. Therefore, in anticipation of genuinely impolite insults and verbal attacks that will inevitability come their way, Eva proposes that this group of drag queens practices them out with each other to build up their defense to mitigate the sting of being insulted by members from other communities.

While this talk is positively evaluated in the context of the backstage among in-group members, Eva makes it clear that this same talk uttered by non-drag queens is often evaluated negatively:

(6) ***Eva**: I think sometimes people, who are in engrossed in drag culture, like watch things like RuPaul's Drag Race, and think it's funny. Umm, or think they're experts. And they'll walk up to you without knowing who you are, and say something to you, and you just kind of……it takes you back for a second, because you're just like…no…like…you don't know me, you're not part of the culture…you need to have a seat over there. It's really funny, how many times someone will walk up to you and tell you that your performance sucked.*
***Sean**: Really?*
***Eva**: Mhmm. And I was like, I wish you would walk up to an artist and tell them that their paintings suck. I really wish you would. Because you would be on that floor. But at the same time, we all have to maintain some…level of…demeanor, and we just smile and nod and walk away. And not…throw drinks in their face.*

The drag queens in the present study felt that when performing drag they are creating performance art. For example, when I asked Uma how many years she has been performing drag she responded, "*I have been doing the art of female impersonation for 2 years,*" and Monique also echoed this sentiment, "*I do it because it's art,*" when Travis asked the queens about their motivation for performing drag. These comments fall in line with Simmons' (2014) drag queen cultural

code of "exude professionalism," which includes behaviors such as treating the art seriously and presenting oneself well, both physically and emotionally. When in drag, these queens not only represent themselves but they also represent their drag community, which may be a possible explanation for why this cultural code is highly valued.

Therefore, when non-drag queen members negatively comment on a queen's performance, appearance or any other aspect that is directly tied to their drag queen persona, this attacks the drag queen's social identity face, i.e. "the fundamental desire for people to acknowledge and uphold our social identities or roles" (Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540). When non-drag queens tell these performers that their performance was terrible or that they look hideous they are telling the queens that they are not representing the drag queen community well; this is exemplified by Eva's reaction to these comments "*no…like…you don't know me, you're not part of the culture…you need to have a seat over there,*" in that she thinks these outgroup members are in no position to judge drag queens. All the drag queens in the present study indicated through their backstage talk that they take their art very seriously, so therefore it is not surprising that they would evaluate potentially impolite comments made by non-drag queens as genuine impoliteness.

To conclude this sub-section, I propose the following working definition of 'reading' based on my interview with Eva, which then guided my analysis of the backstage talk:

> An interactional practice in which drag queens creatively and humorously comment on an aspect of another drag queen that: (a) the target may be self-conscious about; (b) the other queens know that the target may be self-conscious about it. When performed by in-group members this type of talk is frequently evaluated as mock impoliteness since its function is in support of building a thick skin for in-group members, who may encounter similar talk from non-drag queens.

Although Murray's (1979) study of gay ritual insults noted the function of sharpening verbal skills to fight back when provoked the added function of reading as practiced by this community of drag queens is that the interactional practice is preemptively preparing one another to face a hostile environment that will comment on them in a negative way. As such, the context of the backstage creates an atmosphere where participants should enter and be prepared to give and take this type of talk to achieve this interactional goal. However, similar comments made by non-drag queens outside of this safe space context may receive an entirely different evaluation, i.e. genuine impoliteness. The context-dependent nature of the interactional practice of reading provides support to Haugh and Bousfield's (2012) conceptualization of separating the practice, i.e. talk and conduct, from their evaluations due to the slippery slope between mock and genuine impoliteness.

## 5.2 Reading and evaluations of mock impoliteness in drag queen backstage talk

In this first stretch of talk, Travis and I have just entered the backstage and the three queens Eva, Melinda and Monique are waiting on James to come back with shots. Melinda has just asked Eva why James is taking so long:

**Example 1.** Pre-performance talk between Eva, Melinda and Monique (Jeff is present)[5]

```
45. Eva:      listen
              it's not                                [sharp breath intake]
              . how
              daaare you
              . that
              RATTED
              ass
              . . thirsty's
              WIG
              of them all
              . . looking like youuu
              on a Saturday night
46. Melinda:      she wants
              she needs to go to the ocean
              because she's so thirsty\
47. Eva:                                \honey        [laughter from all]
              she needs to sl-
              live
              in the ocean       [more laughter, including from Melinda,
                                                      for three seconds]
48. Melinda: I hate everybody
              for
              fake laughing at me           [quiet laughter from others]
49. Monique: . girl
              that was a real laugh\
50. Melinda:                          \I KNOW
              that's what I have to
              tell myself
              that it was faaake                        [fake sad tone]
51. Eva:      . noo
              we're just
              laughing at you                             [door opens]
```

5. As the researcher and his colleague were present for all backstage interactions their names will not be included among those present during the stretches of talk.

The topic of conversation in Example 1 revolves around Melinda's sexual promiscuity as exemplified by the use of the slang term "thirsty" to describe her longing for sexual encounters. Eva introduces this topic in turn 45 when she uses the unpalatable presupposition "*looking like youuu on a Saturday,*" i.e. 'you normally look like a mess,' when describing Melinda. This utterance has the potential to attack Melinda's quality face since it is denying that she holds positive physical attributes, in addition to challenging her sexual morality. However, we see that this utterance is viewed as an allowable offense since Melinda collaboratively builds off of Eva's observation by saying that "*she needs to go to the ocean because she's so thirsty*" in line 46; this humorous and creative self-evaluation is a play on words by combining the literal and metaphorical use of the word "thirsty." This comment and Eva's continuation of the analogy in turn 47, "*she needs to live in the ocean,*" receives laughter from everyone backstage. After the laughter dies down Melinda makes a playful reference in line 48 to being a little bit self-conscious about the laughter that has just occurred at her expense through trying to frame the laughter as not real; however, both Monique (line 49) and Eva (line 51) are quick to point out the laughter is real. Overall, through the exaggerated tone in line 50 and her laughter in Eva's turn 47 we can see that Melinda evaluates Eva's read as mock impoliteness. Although the topic of sexual promiscuity is common with interactional practices of LGBT people (Heisterkamp & Alberts 2000, Jones 2007) this topic could also be used as a target for non-community members who may direct the personalized negative vocatives "slut" and "whore" towards them. In this way, the queens are not only practicing their verbal skills related to this topic but also directing these utterances towards one of the queens who may encounter this type of talk outside the backstage.

The next stretch of talk takes place as the DJ is backstage talking to Melinda about her song choices for the evening. While the DJ was playing through the songs on her laptop one of Melinda's numbers came up:

**Example 2.** Pre-performance talk, between the DJ, Melinda and Eva (Monique and Jeff are present)

```
141. Melinda: oh I love that song!
              is that mine?\
142. DJ:      which one is this?
143. Eva:                  \is that mine?          [mocking Melinda]
144. Melinda:                              something
145. DJ:      . this is something
              ok
146. Melinda: yes
147. DJ:        that's what I thought
              ok
```

148. Eva: is that mine? [impersonating Melinda's voice]
of course
who else is going to do that?
149. Melinda: yayyyyy!
150. Eva: . nobody's heard that song since '92\
so
151. Melinda: \girl that's alright

While the other three drag queens perform to modern pop songs Melinda is known for only performing songs from the 1990s, which happens to be the decade in which she won the State's Miss Gay contest. After mocking Melinda's voice Eva continues her turn in line 148 with the unpalatable question "*who else is going to do that?*" and the unpalatable presupposition "*nobody's heard that song since '92,*" i.e. 'you are old and so is your song choice,' in line 150. These two conventionalized impoliteness formulae draw attention to Melinda's predictable and possibly outdated performances, thereby potentially attacking her social identity face of being a competent drag queen who is able to entertain the audience.

The importance of being an entertaining performer is a highly valued characteristic for this group of drag queens. For example, while Uma was performing her third number, Travis asked Monique what makes a good drag queen and she responded with "*someone who can do their face well and put on a show. It's the face but it's also like the entertainment value. Like I said you don't have to have the face, as long as you have the entertainment value, and then you can work on your face to bring it up to something*" (lines 2068–2072), and Melinda echoed her agreement by saying "*amen*" (line 2073). During my initial research encounter with Eva she mentioned to me that, "*I want to become one of those queens who always pushes herself and I want to evolve with the community. I mean, fashion evolves, all these things evolve and you have to evolve with it or you're left behind.*"

In light of these comments it is not surprising then that Eva and Monique would comment on Melinda's song choice and performance style that has not evolved since the 1990s. This was notable throughout the night when these performers, in addition to Uma, would collaboratively comment on Melinda's performances. An example of this type of talk can be found in Example 3, in which Uma has asked James to bring her a glass of water.

**Example 3.** During performance talk, between Eva, Monique and Uma (Jeff is present, Melinda is onstage performing her first number)

1371. Uma: . I'm parched
. . I have to keep it classy
. . . . . she's out there like this
1372. Eva. . . right?
1373. Uma: . . I bet you

```
                . . or trying to get (?)\
1374. Monique:                          \no
                she quickly turns to the wall
1375. Uma:      . . or licking something\
1376. Eva:                              \[chuckles]
                ok
                I was about to say
                she could be making out with the wall [voice trails off]
```

Although it may be acceptable for other drag queens to comment on one another's performances the same type of talk performed by audience members may not be acceptable, as was mentioned by Eva during the interview in Excerpt (6). In fact, comments made about one's performance from non-drag queens may explain why this would be a common topic used in reading during backstage talk, in order to build a thick skin. However, we can see that these comments are evaluated as mock impoliteness with Melinda's acceptance of the read in turn 151 of Example 1 "*girl that's alright,*" in addition to her collaboration in the topic development in line 186 during the following stretch of talk in Example 4:

**Example 4.** Pre-performance talk between Eva, Monique, Melinda and the DJ (with Jeff and James present)

```
181. DJ:        but I didn't hear the rest of it
182. Eva:               ummmm
                you know what?
                there's four songs
                Melinda does
                you have them all
                don't worry about it
                . just play one
                she'll go out there                              [DJ laughs]
                . and\
183. Monique:         \sing to the wall\
184. Eva:                               \[laughter]
                . stand there
                turn around
                and
                . . . throw her arms over her head
185. Monique: . . [short laughter]
                girl
                we know your wig                          [emphasis on wig]
186. Melinda:                       [fake crying laughter for 3 seconds]
                                                [Monique chants "wig it"]
                you guys are
                sooo
                funny                                  [said sarcastically]
                I
```

*[fake short laugh]*

187. Monique: *\nailed it [creaky voice]*

188. Eva: *could you please be Mrs. Garrett*

189. Monique: *(?)*
*[some kind of chanting]*

190. Melinda: *. girls*
*girls [higher pitch]*
*gir-*
*YES!*
*that's what we're going to do*
*and she's going to be Tootie [Eva laughs]*
*. and*
*Uma will be*
*umm*

191. Eva: *Blair*

192. Melinda: *you'll be Natalie*
*and you'll be*
*yes*

193. Eva: *WHY AM I DOING NATALIE!\ [high pitched voice]*

194. Melinda: *\because*
*you're fat*
*and gross [quiet laughter from others]*
*. . I'm mean*
*let's be realistic*
*you dumb bitch [Eva and Monique laugh for 3 seconds]*

195. Eva: *AHHH [Melinda chuckles]*
*oh my god*
*you're going to fucking turn and (?)*

196. Melinda: *. I'm going to*
*turn to the dark side*
*in about twenty second*
*WHY'D YOU HAVE*
*WAIT*
*OK*

197. Monique: *HOLD ON*
*you turned around (?)*

198. Melinda: *YOU'RE GOING TO BE TOOTIE*

199. Monique: *to the*
*dark side*

200. Melinda: *SHE'S GOING TO BE TOOTIE?*
*. because*
*she's skinny*
*and blaaack*
*okay*
*that's funnn [Monique laughs]*
*. . I'm mean*
*you're not that good as an actress in draaag*
*you're going to be*

*on the great screen?*
*we're going to*
*we're going to*
*I'll be like this*
*girls* *[sings]*
*God*
*but I want to be*
*Blairrr*

201. Eva: *\you can't be Blair*
*. . you're big*
*as you're ugly* *[Melinda fake laughs]*

202. Monique: *. . ooohhh*

203. Melinda: *my name's*
*Melinda*
*Noelle*
*Warren* *[Blair Warren is the character's full name]*
*. Blairrr*
*Warren*

204. Eva: *your nameee*
*is*
*Melinda*
*Noelle*

Earlier in the evening Eva commented on how Melinda looked like the character Mrs. Garrett from the television series *The Facts of Life*, so when this topic resurfaces in line 188 Melinda begins to assign them characters from the show in lines 190–192. Melinda assigns Eva the role of Natalie, who is also large-figured. When Eva playfully protests this move in turn 193 Melinda immediately responds in line 194 with the personalized negative assertion "*you're fat and gross*" and vocative "*you dumb bitch*," which both could potentially be viewed as an attack on her personal characteristics, i.e. an attack on quality face. By creatively and humorously comparing Eva to a TV show character Melinda comments on Eva's weight, which is an aspect that Eva may be self-conscious about given that she has posted pictures to her Facebook fan page that showcase her recent weight loss; however, as can be seen from Eva's laughter in line 194 and her exaggerated vocalization in turn 195, she positively evaluates Melinda's talk as mock impoliteness.

Another indication that Eva has evaluated the comment as mock impoliteness is her cooperative turn-taking by building on Melinda's read. In line 201 Eva tells Melinda that she cannot be Blair "*you're big as you're ugly*," which is a tit-for-tat personalized negative assertion that attacks both Melinda's personal qualities (i.e. her weight) as well as her drag queen social identity face of being beautiful in drag. While backstage, I heard Melinda make numerous comments about her weight and appearance, such as "*everything about me is sloppy and gross and fat*", which may indicate a certain level of self-consciousness about her drag appearance, in addition to calls for attention. Being told that you look ugly in drag from audience

members is certainly a comment that most if not all drag queens have heard at one point or another during their career (Hopkins 2004), so this comment backstage can have the function of preparing each other for this type of verbal assault outside of their safe space. As such, Melinda's use of fake playful laughter in response to Eva's turn and the negotiation between the two queens over Melinda's name in lines 203–204 seem to indicate that Melinda has evaluated Eva's read in line 201 as mock impoliteness.

The back-and-forth talk between Eva and Melinda continued throughout the entire night, as demonstrated in the following stretch of talk in Example 5 as the performers are putting on the finishing touches to their face and outfit:

**Example 5.** Pre-performance talk, between Eva and Melinda (with Monique, Uma and James present)

*930. Melinda: . wait*
*you*
*nobody likes my attitude?*
*uhhhhh*
*ok*

*931. Eva: \nobody likes [said quietly]*
*your*
*act*
*either*
*buddy [laughter from others]*
*. . we still*
*keep*
*you on*

*932. Melinda: awwwww*
*mannnn*
*well then maybe*
*I should just sit back here*
*and get*
*shingles*
*from your mouth [coughing noise from James]*

*933. Eva: . . YOU don't*
*even make*
*any sense*
*. like*
*. the worst part*
*about your whole life*
*is that*
*you*
*don't*
*make*
*sense*

*934. Melinda: . I*
*DO*
*MAKE SENSE!*

In discussing her attitude with James, Melinda poses the question to the other drag queens backstage which Eva immediately responses to in turn 931 with the pointed criticism "*nobody likes your act either buddy*" and the condescension "*we still keep you on.*" It is especially interesting to note her the condescending use of the vocative "*buddy*" instead of the in-group term "*girl.*" Again, this is an allowable offense on Melinda's drag social identity face as it relates to her ability to put on a good show and she appears to evaluate it as mock impoliteness through her exaggerated vocalizations "*awwwww mannnn*" and her expansion of the reading exchange in line 932.

In this expansion Melinda makes reference to an earlier comment she made, "*if you just shut your mouth, your voice is giving me shingles*"(line 911), while Eva was playfully and loudly freaking out about not being completely ready and composed for the show. The comment received a lot of laughter from everyone backstage, including Eva, which may be why Melinda decided to expand the topic with the unpalatable question "*well then maybe I should just sit back here and get shingles from your mouth*," i.e. a potential attack on Eva's quality face meaning 'you are an annoying person to be around.'

However, instead of simply responding with "*I hate you,*" as she did earlier (line 912), Eva more creatively responds this time with a personalized negative assertion ("*YOU don't make any sense*") and negative reference ("*the worst part about your whole life is that you don't make sense*") in turn 933. These two conventionalized impoliteness formulae reflect another possible attack on Melinda's quality face, i.e. 'you are so illogical that nobody should pay attention to what you have to say,' and it appears to have struck a nerve with Melinda as she protests this in turn 934 "*I DO MAKE SENSE!*" In Labov (1972a) it was noted that direct responses to ritual insults are a sign that the insult was true, so in this case by directly responding Melinda seems to be self-conscious that people may view her in this way. However, the response appears to be part of the acceptable back-and-forth exchange with Eva as the response is a loud exaggeration, thereby maintaining the mock impoliteness evaluation of this constructed exchange.

In the next stretch of talk Eva is onstage performing her first number while the other drag queens are backstage. Eva's song is coming to an end and Melinda is the next performer scheduled to go onstage, so she asks Uma and Monique how she looks:

**Example 6.** During show talk between Melinda, Monique and Uma (James is present)

```
1249. Melinda: do I look horrible?
               . do I look horrible?
               . . seriously
               like
               I'm fricking my mind
```

1250. Uma: . . . . . how many slugs [Eva's song ends]
did you mother
for that hair?

1251. Monique: that was [Monique speaks into the microphone]
the one [Melinda fake laughs]
the only

1252. Melinda: nineeee
thoooousand

1253. Monique: your show director for the evening
[Melinda chuckles]
Miss Eva Franco

1254. Melinda: nine million [Eva enters backstage]

1255. Eva: . . . . . alright (name of college town)
[takes microphone and speaks into it]

1256. James: I hope she can hear

1257. Melinda: shit

1258. Eva: can you hand
me my drink
please? [quietly to James]

1259. Melinda: . . . . . can you look?
right here

1260. Eva: how we doing tonight (name of college town)?
[speaks into the microphone]
. . . . woooo [repeats the crowd's vocalization crowd]
. . it's a packed house in the back
[goes out to the front stage]

1261. Melinda: do I look baaaad [Travis laughs]

1262. Uma: . . no it doesn't

1263. Monique: . . ten in the back

1264. Melinda: don't lie
. . be serious

1265. Monique: . . I think you look like shit

1266. Uma: . . . . she just likes the
hair
do\

1267. Melinda: \no!
because
I really think that I look [Monique and Jeff quietly
start talking about Monique's outfit]
. so disgusting

1268. Uma: . . . . you can hardly
see
the stains
on your costume\

1269. Melinda: \ughhh
what about my ha-

```
                . . (?)
                . . I like yourrrrs
                . . . why you trying to grab
                my titties\
1270. Uma:                  \because
                I like them\
1271. Melinda:               \[loud breath intake]
1272. Uma:      . . this one's showing a little bit
                . . . . girl you so
                classsy\                              [Melinda fake laughs]
1273. Melinda: . . . . . . . . my (?)   [Monique and Jeff stop talking]
                . awwww
                . . they're going to be like this
                . . . . . . . that's what the back looks like
                . Monique
                . the back
1274. Monique: . . . . . . I mean
                it's not as good
                as it's not a wig\
1275. Melinda:                      \no
                this looks
                stupid
                . never mind\
1276. Monique:                \no!
                it's good
1277. Melinda:              you just answered
                . my question
```

From this stretch of talk we can see that Melinda appears to be self-conscious about her outfit before going on stage, a recurrent topic throughout the night. In line 1250 Uma begins the reading exchange with the unpalatable question "*how many slugs did you mother for that hair?*" which has the potential to attack Melinda's drag queen social identity as it relates to her wig choice and her appearance. However, instead of evaluating the talk as genuine impoliteness we can see that Melinda collaboratively builds off this read by playfully responding with the exaggerated vocalization of "*nineeee thoooousand*" in turn 1252, laughter during Monique's turn in line 1253 and another response, "*nine million*," in turn 1254. Monique later continues this topic in line 1274 with the pointed criticism "*I mean it's not as good as it's not a wig*" when Melinda asks for her opinion on the back of her outfit. However, despite the jocular frame of these utterances both Monique and Uma have to explicitly tell Melinda that she looks good in lines 1262 "*no it doesn't [look bad]*" and 1276 "*no! it's good*," respectively. This is to say, both of these performers pause from reading to reassure Melinda that she does look good.

However, even though Uma takes a momentary break from reading to reassure Melinda that does not mean that she ends her participation in this session. In turn 1268 Uma continues to read Melinda with the unpalatable presupposition "*you can hardly see the stains on your costume*" and with the pointed criticism "*this one's [a breast] showing a little bit*" in line 1272. Both of these conventionalized impoliteness formulae could possibly attack Melinda's drag social identity face, i.e. 'you are not being professional because your drag appearance is a mess,' but once again we can see that Melinda interprets them as mock impoliteness with her exaggerated vocalization in line 1269 and her fake playful laughter during Uma's turn in line 1272. From these exchanges we can see that both Monique and Uma were preparing Melinda for what she might actually encounter from audience members while onstage, revealing that both queens were helping her to build a thick skin.

In this final example from the backstage talk the backup dancers Chris and Robyn are looking for one of Robyn's black sheer tops, which they think got misplaced with Melinda's things. The performers and the dancers are going through a pile of clothes that Robyn just dumped out on the floor and they are finding some items that actually belong to them:

**Example 7.** During show talk between Eva, Melinda, Uma, Chris, Robyn (Jeff is present, Monique is onstage performing her third number)

*2192. Chris:* *she's looking for a*
*black*
*sheer*
*top*

*2193. Melinda:* *. . girl*
*all you got to do*
*like that*
*like this*
*. . . no*
*no pants*

*2194. Eva:* *. . Uma*
*do you have a?*

*2195. Chris:* *. . . . . it ain't you?*

*2196. Robyn:* *\noo*
*it's not there*

*2197. Melinda:* *. . WHO DID THIS!*
*WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?*
*this is embarraaaassing*

*2198. Robyn:* *ok*
*this search warrant*
*is over* *[Robyn laughs]*

*2199. Eva:* *. . . well*
*what (?)*

*2200. Chris:* *(?)*
*God damn*

2201. Melinda: . . . oh there's my sheer top
I have that [Melinda laughs for 4 seconds]

2202. Eva: girl

2203. Uma: I keep lots of stuff in there\

2204. Eva: \apparently

2205. Melinda: you're
beautiful
. it's probably her
. skinny white girl
steals things
all the time\

2206. Uma: \it is not\

2207. Melinda: \yeah it is!
your eye makeup's horrible
and your face is fat
. . want to fight?\

2208. Uma: \I don't think you know anything
about makeup yourself
girl\ ["oooo" vocalization from Eva]

2209. Chris: \oh now bitch

2210. Melinda: ohhhhh
kayyyy [fake laugh]
. . no
she's probably right
. . I want to know
she's paid

2211. Eva: no
she's got chlamydia's brain\

2212. Melinda: \I can't have all this
and brains
toooooo
I mean myyyy Goddd [fake laugh]
girl
that's ignorance\ [Robyn laughs]

2213. Chris: \actually not [Melinda chuckles]

2214. Robyn: ok

2215. Melinda: . (?)
I cannot have
allll this

2216. Chris: you just did (?) version too

2217. Melinda: and brainssss toooo

2218. Chris: remember that?\

2219. Robyn: \ok

2220. Eva: . she said
I can't have all this
and brains [emphasis on 'and']

In line 2207 Melinda begins the exchange with two personalized negative references "*your eye makeup's horrible and your face is fat*" directed towards Uma, followed by a challenge to fight. This turn is quite different from other exchanges we have seen so far, with the exception of Example 4, which was creatively embedded in a comparison of the queens to *The Facts of Life* characters, in that these utterances are very direct. By using direct language and a challenge to physically fight I would argue that in this moment Melinda adopts the role of a non-drag queen that would utter these insults to Uma outside of the backstage. This verbal play gives her an opportunity to practice responding to this possible attack on her drag appearance, as it relates to her social identity face. In fact, Uma does recognize Melinda's attempt and responses with a read in the form of a pointed criticism "*I don't think you know anything about makeup yourself*" in turn 2208; the acceptability of this read is ratified by Eva's vocalization and by Melinda's exaggerated vocalization and her acceptance that Uma probably has a point in line 2210. With these cues it appears that the queens have oriented themselves to achieving mock impoliteness that has the function of building a thick skin and providing members with an opportunity to practice their verbal skills in the face of potentially offensive comments.

In Example 7 we can also see that Eva reads Melinda in line 2211 with the unpalatable presupposition that "*she's got chlamydia's brain,*" meaning not only that Melinda is sexually promiscuous but also that the sexually-transmitted disease has affected her brain, i.e. a possible explanation for why she is illogical (Example 5). This possible attack on Melinda's quality face is deemed permissible with her collaborative response in turn 2212 "*I can't have all this and brains toooooo*" and its elongated vowels. In this response she implies that being beautiful is the reason why she has many sexual partners, fending off another possible attack towards her sexuality morality that we examined in Example 1. However, in this example, she collaboratively deflects the comment by redirecting attention to how beautiful she is instead of collaboratively building off of the allowable offense from Example 1; in this way, she simply brushed off the comment as if it were made by a non-community member, again showing the power of using reading backstage to prepare in-group members for all possible verbal assaults once they leave this safe space.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The present study sought to investigate the interactional practice of reading in backstage drag queen talk by analyzing potential cases through a mock impoliteness framework (Haugh & Bousfield 2012), in addition to a local definition of the practice that was obtained through a semi-structured interview with Eva. From

this interview I was able to piece together three necessary components of the practice: (1) the topic of reading, i.e. a characteristic that the target already knows about herself and is self-conscious about; (2) its characteristics, i.e. creativity and humor; (3) its function, i.e. to build a thick skin for other drag queens. The definition of reading that was proposed in this study differs from previous conceptualizations of reading that have focused on its confrontation aspect (Jones 2007, Stanley 1970); what has been highlighted in this study is a pro-social function of reading to prepare drag queens to face a hostile world from both LGBT and non-LGBT peoples (Berkowitz & Belgrave 2010, Berkowitz et al. 2007).

In order to ready in-group members to face hostile verbal attacks outside of the community it is only logical then that reading should comment on aspects that the target already knows about herself and may be self-conscious about; although this aspect is notably different from the interactional practice of ritual insults (Labov 1972a) it is in line with current research on mock impoliteness which has claimed that there may be some truth behind the potentially impolite utterance (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997, Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Mills 2003), as well as with previous definitions of reading (Johnson 1995). It seems that there is contextual pressure from being in the drag queen dressing room that those who enter must submit themselves to and participate in playful exchanges regarding their possible character flaws and self-image issues. After all, these comments are not uttered in malice, e.g. "*reading, is not about being mean and awful*" (Excerpt 3), but rather out of love to boost the armor of its members, as well as giving them the opportunity to sharpen their verbal skills to later unleash on those who would do them harm. Furthermore, there was a competitive spirit observed in the collaborative construction of reading exchanges that has been observed in other interactional practices (Labov 1972a, Jones 2007), that helped contextualize utterances into this jocular frame.

While these comments may be appropriate for one drag queen to say to another the same comment made by an audience member who does not know the queen may not be viewed in the same light. By analyzing the backstage talk in a mock impoliteness framework (Haugh & Bousfield 2012) it was shown how all the utterances contained a possible offense that either violated the queen's quality face or social identity face. This is to say, comments such as "*you're fat and gross*" (Example 4) or "*nobody likes your act either, buddy*" (Example 5) made from one queen to another may be viewed as an allowable offence, i.e. mock impoliteness evaluation, while the same type of comment made to one queen by an out-group member may be viewed as an actual offense, i.e. genuine impoliteness evaluation. This observation is in line with Labov (1972a: 341) who noted that "generally speaking, extended ritual sounding is an in-group process, and when sounding

occurs across group lines, it is often intended to provoke a fight" which may be the case for reading in this local drag queen community.

However, it should be explicitly stated that I am not suggesting here that comments made between queens are always evaluated as mock impoliteness, nor am I suggesting that comments made by out-group members are always evaluated as genuine impoliteness; rather, I am arguing that in-group/out-group status may help create contextual conditions that predispose particular evaluations of talk. Indeed, during my interview Eva mentioned that to distinguish genuine from mock impoliteness during reading one uses "*tone. I mean, you know. You know. When somebody, and you know what your relationship with that person. Now, reading is not supposed to be mean, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't become mean. You know, it's been appropriated by so many people*." This is to say, the evaluation of reading is done in a continuous, dynamic and cumulative fashion in which participants are constantly contextualizing the talk and conduct on the basis of their relationship with the person, the setting, what has come before in the discourse, etc. This is exactly the proposal that Haugh and Bousfield (2012) make in their mock impoliteness framework, which has been supported by the present study.

Linguistically speaking, the reads analyzed in the present study used conventionalized impoliteness formulae (Culpeper 2011), such as personalized negative assertions ("*you're fat and gross*," Example 4), personalized negative references ("*your eye makeup's horrible and your face is fat*," Example 7), pointed criticisms ("*I don't think you know anything about makeup yourself*" (Example 7) and unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions ("*how many slugs did you mother for that hair?*" Example 6). Despite the variation between these linguistic forms, it seems that there was a preference to use pointed criticisms and unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions instead of the negative personalized assertions, vocatives and references, which Culpeper (2011) groups under the umbrella category of 'insults.' Recall that in the interview Eva said, "*reading is supposed to be funny and creative. And that's the thing, it's not like "oh girl well you're a bitch and you're ugly" [a personalized negative assertion], that's not reading, that's just being rude*." Therefore, since indirectness can contribute to the creativity and humor of reading, this may help explain why conventionalized impoliteness formulae such as unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions are used more than other conventionalized impoliteness formulae that are more direct, e.g. insults.

For example, when Uma told Melinda that "*you can hardly see the stains on your costume*" (Example 6) Uma was not directly pointing out the stains on the costume but rather creatively mentioned them via the inferential processes that the utterance triggers. The value of this type of reading was confirmed by Eva during the interview when she said "*like, if someone's like, eyes are too close together, you say something like "oh girl, is it hard for you to see?"* (Excerpt 4). While it is true that

there were three exchanges that contained instances of insults two of them were embedded in a creative frame, i.e. the assigning of television characters to each queen (Example 4) and taking the role of a hostile audience member (Example 7), so that they still maintained the humorous aspect of reading. Previous studies on interactional practices have stressed the creative and humorous nature of this type of relational work (Labov 1972a), so it is not surprising that this group of drag queens also values humor and creativity in reading.

Overall, this study has shown how the cultural value of "building a thick skin" has helped shape the interactional practice of reading within this group of drag queens, which has also been observed with the Australian cultural value of "not taking yourself seriously" and the interactional practices of jocular abuse/face-threatening acts (Haugh & Bousfield 2012, Sinkeviciute 2014). One of the questions that arises from this observation is how new drag queens are socialized into this culture and begin to acquire the linguistic patterns and practices of their new community. Therefore, future research should examine new drag queens' acquisition of cultural practices that are based on linguistic code, such as reading, and how their usage and perception of these practices change over time. Additionally, it would be beneficial to see if the function of reading outlined in this paper is practiced in the wider drag queen community at both the national and international levels.

By investigating drag queen backstage talk through a combination of analytic tools from the mock impoliteness literature and a locally constructed definition informed by an in-group member, the present study examined how the interactional practice of reading is used and functions within this community. Using language to uncover drag queen cultural practices is a recent position advocated by Mann (2011) and Simmons (2014) and the present study has added more evidence to how the combination of both queer theory and linguistics can be used to better inform our knowledge of this particular sub-culture of LGBT people. While this study was able to collect a large amount of data during three research encounters, a more extensive study of how drag queens use language backstage is sorely needed. Hopefully, the present study is a first step towards the realization of such a project, as this community says and has much to say.

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## Transcription conventions

Turn numbers are sequential through the duration of recorded talk. There is only one intonation unit per line. Overlap in talk is indicated by the position of the intonation unit where it begins. Only conventional spelling is used.

| | |
|---|---|
| . | 1/2 second pause |
| ? | final rise intonation |
| ! | exclamatory intonation |
| \ | latching |
| [] | nonverbals |
| GO | louder speech in capital letters |
| goooo | lengthened syllable |
| (?) | unintelligible speech |

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