Werk, Post, Authenticate: Drag Performance and Queer Identity on TikTok

This paper examines how queer authenticity and stylization are vocally and visually crafted on TikTok through the drag-centered performances of Tyreece Nye, a non-binary Black content creator, digital activist, and reality TV winner. In a media environment that both amplifies and algorithmically constrains queer expression (e.g., Abidin 2021; Bishop 2021), Tyreece leverages multimodal techniques—voice, embodiment, and platform affordances—to stage and restage queer selfhood. Through a combined sociophonetic and discourse-analytic lens, this study explores how vocal features interact with platformed persona-building and social legibility.

The qualitative component draws from a detailed analysis of selected TikToks, tracing Tyreece's layered deployment of drag and queer performance tropes. Drawing on Coupland's (2007) model of stylization and Barrett's (2017) work on performative subcultural indexicality, the analysis reveals how Tyreece reframes dominant visual and linguistic tropes (e.g., polished femininity, performative excess) in ways that challenge white and cisnormative media expectations. Stylized catchphrases, exaggerated gestures, and rapid genre-switching work together to authenticate their queer presence while resisting algorithmic flattening.

The quantitative component analyzes 50 TikTok videos, acoustically segmented and aligned for phonetic analysis. Comparing "Act 1" (pre-transformation) and "Act 2" (post-transformation), we find statistically significant differences across multiple sociophonetic indices. In line with Zimman (2013), pitch is higher and more variable in Act 2, indexing heightened femininity and performativity. Segmentally, /s/ and /z/ tokens in Act 2 show significantly lower Center of Gravity (COG) values and greater positive skewness (cf. Podesva & Van Hofwegen 2014), indicating a stylistic shift toward brighter, more emphatic fricatives. These patterns, while situated within stereotypical "gay speech" features, are recontextualized here through Tyreece's embodied and racialized drag identity.

Taken together, these findings underscore how drag performers on TikTok strategically deploy vocal stylization—not as mere aesthetic enhancement, but as a tool for queer world-building and representational visibility. Despite the brevity of individual TikToks, their cumulative impact reflects a powerful form of everyday queer labor that expands the possibilities of sounding—and being—queer online.

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