



# Queer Pop Stardom: Chappell Roan and the Radical Potential of Pop Music

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## Abstract

Chappell Roan, an emerging talent in queer pop music, challenges traditional heteronormative ideals through camp aesthetics, drag culture, and storytelling. Her debut album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, offers a genuine portrayal of queer identity, rooted in her experiences growing up in conservative Missouri. This paper examines Roan's music and performance style through the lenses of queer theory and camp, emphasizing her critique of compulsory heterosexuality, gender norms, and the commercialization of queerness in pop culture. Tracks like "Pink Pony Club" and "Good Luck, Babe!" showcase her defiance against societal expectations, presenting aspirational visions of queer liberation. Roan's use of exaggerated femininity and theatricality aligns her with queer pop icons while creating a space for LGBTQ+ fans to engage in radical self-expression. Her embrace of drag culture and bold humour further challenges rigid concepts of gender and sexuality, highlighting pop music's potential as a platform for queer world-building. Ultimately, Roan's artistry redefines the landscape of queer pop stardom, highlighting the significance of representation that is both celebratory and revolutionary.

## Keywords

Queer pop music, Chappell Roan, Camp aesthetics, Drag Culture, Compulsory heterosexuality, LGBTQ+ representation, Pop stardom, Heteronormativity, Queer world-building



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ISSN 2817-2051

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## **Introduction**

Chappell Roan, originally named Kayleigh Rose Amstutz, became a prominent name in queer pop music with her debut album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*. Growing up in the conservative town of Willard, Missouri, Roan's exploration of queer spaces had a significant impact on her musical journey, helping her develop a colourful, campy persona known for eye-catching performances, such as her six-foot-wide butterfly wings at Coachella (Jarrett, 2024). Influenced by pop legends like Lady Gaga and Madonna, her lyrics explore themes of lesbian identity, self-acceptance, and the struggles between being true to oneself and conforming to societal expectations in songs like "Pink Pony Club" and "Good Luck, Babel!" This paper will address how Chappell Roan's use of camp aesthetics and drag culture positions her as a queer pop icon, challenging compulsory heterosexuality in the current sociopolitical climate.

Through humour, camp aestheticism, and storytelling, Roan creates a space for queer expression in pop music, challenging the notion of the 'Midwest princess' within a heteronormative society. This paper presents a theoretical framework on queer representation and camp aesthetics, delves into Roan's lyrics and themes as critiques of heteropatriarchal standards, and investigates her use of camp aestheticism and drag to reconstruct and perform queer identity. It also examines how her whiteness and Midwest identity influence her persona and concludes by emphasizing her significance in queer pop culture and the engagement of LGBTQ+ fans.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Chappell Roan's work, when examined through the lenses of queer theory and camp aestheticism, reflects queer identities in pop culture and pushes back against heteronormativity: celebrating a variety of gender and sexual identities. In contrast to mainstream pop artists like Katy Perry and Rita Ora, who have faced criticism for commodifying queerness and engaging in queerbaiting (Parahoo, 2020, p. 26), Roan's work reflects authentic community. Queerbaiting "could be defined as producers and purveyors of media implying queer content in order to lure in viewers and then not following through" (Nichols, 2020, p. 1462). Roan's music serves as a true expression of her queer journey, offering an earnest portrayal that resonates deeply with LGBTQ+ audiences (Bradley, 2018, p. 30). This authenticity nurtures a sense of community, underscoring the power of queer-created media to mirror and affirm lived experiences. (Bradley, 2018, p. 10).

Roan also embraces camp, an aesthetic with rich historical ties to queer culture. Camp aestheticism initially emerged as a discreet yet defiant form of self-expression, using humour to challenge rigid heteronormative norms that marginalized nonconforming identities (Coons, n.d., p. 71). It has since become a crucial talking point in public discussions of popular culture, merging comedy with political commentary to question mainstream views and promote queer visibility within the music industry (Coons, n.d., p. 71). As Coons (n.d.) emphasizes the transformative potential of camp aestheticism, they note that it “redefines what is considered normal” (p. 77). Roan’s exaggerated, playful style exemplifies this by prompting audiences to reconsider traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity. She uses humour and theatricality as entertainment, but also as a critique of rigid gender and sexuality norms. In this way, her work demonstrates how camp aestheticism can operate as both a celebratory and rebellious tool, opening a space for queer expression and challenging heteronormative expectations in queer culture.

This performative side of Roan’s work aligns closely with Judith Butler’s concept of gender and gender performativity (1999). As Butler explains, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1999, pp. 43-44). Roan’s exaggerated femininity through wigs, makeup, and stage costumes illustrates this performance, aligning with drag culture’s tradition of representing gender as constructed rather than natural. While her performances embrace exaggeration and theatricality, they also invite reflection on gender itself, encouraging audiences to question societal norms and consider alternative modes of self-expression. By incorporating camp aestheticism, Roan creates a space for complex identities and celebrates the fluidity of queerness, thereby contributing to the evolution of pop culture.

With this framework of queer theory, camp aestheticism, and gender performativity in mind, it becomes easier to see how Roan’s music and performances put these ideas into practice. Her lyrics, stage persona, and visual choices are deliberate acts that challenge heteronormativity expectations and explore the fluidity of gender and sexuality. Examining songs like “Pink Pony Club” and “Good Luck, Babel!” shows how she turns these concepts into stories about longing, resistance, and self-expression, creating spaces for queer empowerment while also questioning societal norms.

### **Analysis of Chappell Roan's Lyrics and Themes**

Chappell Roan's "Pink Pony Club" stands as a powerful anthem for queer liberation and self-expression, highlighting themes of community, independence, and self-exploration. The song contrasts the restrictive atmosphere of the Midwest with California, a place that represents liberation and acceptance for queer individuals. Lyrics like "I'm having wicked dreams of leaving Tennessee / Hear Santa Monica, I swear it's calling me" (Roan, 2023) capture the longing to discover a space where queerness can flourish without fear of judgment. Roan's music highlights the power of pop as a vehicle to escape the limitations of mainstream society (Björck, 2011, p. 19). These lyrics function as both a personal escape fantasy and a camp-inspired critique of heteronormative small-town values, showing how pop music can offer a vision of queer futurity.

Roan's lyrics embody the idea of queerness as a futuristic ideal. Muñoz (2009) states, "Queerness is not yet here... it is an ideal, an aspiration, a dream of a future that is not yet fully realized" (p. 1). In "Pink Pony Club," Roan envisions breaking free from a culturally restrictive setting to find a place where her queer identity can thrive. This desire for liberation reflects Muñoz's belief that queerness is not entirely realized in the present but serves as an aspirational vision for the future. Roan's depiction of this journey resonates with the hope for a world where queer identities are celebrated without limitations, offering a critique of the current state while envisioning a more inclusive tomorrow.

Additionally, "Pink Pony Club" critiques capitalist frameworks within the music industry. Roan's lyrics imply that queer spaces, like the Pink Pony Club, provide a form of resistance against the commercialization and classification of identity as well as an opportunity for genuine self-expression. She expressed her dedication to bringing joy and authenticity to her audience when she asserted that, "The only thing I want to offer as a human is to make a space where there is joy, where there wasn't before" (Capital Buzz, 2024, 33:30). This aligns with her overarching message of challenging societal restrictions.

Chappell Roan's "Good Luck, Babe!" is a striking anthem that critiques compulsory heterosexuality, radically addressing the societal pressures that uphold heterosexual norms. The song's upbeat melody starkly contrasts its emotional lyrics. It tells a story of heartbreak and defiance as Roan reflects on the emotional turmoil of watching someone she loves settle for a relationship that suppresses their true desires (Capital, 2024). The chorus, "You can kiss a hundred boys in bars /

Shoot another shot, try to stop the feeling” (Roan, 2024), captures the internal struggle many LGBTQ+ individuals experience when faced with heteronormative expectations, urging listeners to acknowledge that desire cannot simply be ignored or erased. Roan’s critique of compulsory heterosexuality is evident as she implies that no amount of conforming to societal norms can truly silence one’s genuine desires. This directly reflects Adrienne Rich’s (2006) idea of ‘compulsory heterosexuality,’ which positions lesbian existence as erased within a patriarchal society. Through depicting queer love as natural and unavoidable, Roan actively resists the erasure of lesbian existence within a patriarchal society.

The line “When you wake up next to him in the middle of the night / With your head in your hands, you’re nothing more than his wife” (Roan, 2024) highlights the constraints imposed on women by traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. The imagery of waking up beside a man and confronting the burden of a socially assigned role serves as powerful commentary on the repression many feel within a heteronormative, patriarchal society (Seidman, 2009, p. 22). Roan’s emotional delivery in this bridge, where she laments the painful realization of her partner’s self-denial, acts as a moment of rebellion against the societal framework that insists on hegemonic heterosexuality. Roan’s lyrics convey a critique of how heteronormative culture obscures the freedom to explore and express diverse sexualities (Seidman, 2009, p. 18). It also outlines how compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates male dominance by imposing restrictive norms on women’s relationships and identities (Massey et al., 2021, p. 182).

Roan’s critique of compulsory heterosexuality delves into the emotional burden of living a life that contradicts one’s true self. The line “I just wanna love someone who calls me ‘baby’” (Roan, 2024) captures the deep desire for a genuine relationship in which Roan can be loved freely without shame or fear; she remains determined not to settle for relationships dictated by societal expectations. This sentiment explores how women’s relationships with one another are frequently dismissed or forced into secrecy (Rich, 2006, p. 210), directly challenging the social structures that restrict women’s autonomy and choices in love. By confronting these societal limitations through her candid and relatable lyrics, Roan fosters a space for empowerment and resistance, where individuality and queer love prevail over conventional standards. “Good Luck, Babe!” is a personal narrative and a cultural commentary, delivering a powerful message to those who might suppress their true selves in the name of conformity: good luck, babe!

### **Roan’s Use of Camp Aesthetics and Drag Culture**

Building on the themes of resistance to societal pressures and embracing authentic queer expression in her music, Chappell Roan brings these ideas to life on stage through camp aestheticism and drag culture. Her performances create a vibrant platform for exaggerated femininity and queerness to thrive, challenging heteronormative societal norms and expectations. Camp aestheticism, characterized by exaggeration, irony, and theatricality, is fundamental to Roan's aesthetic choices, enabling her to resist mainstream conventions. Her performances often combine elements of horror, burlesque, and theatre (Santino, 2024), creating a realm where beauty and grotesqueness coexist. In a 2024 interview with Jimmy Fallon, she expresses her passion for “looking pretty and scary” or “pretty and tacky” (Santino, 2024). Roan's work reflects a broad interpretation of femininity. Her playful approach blends beauty with the unsettling, celebrating the fluidity of gender and its performative nature, which is a key aspect of drag culture. In doing so, she encourages her audience to challenge conventional gender norms and recognize that femininity, like all gender expressions, is shaped by societal expectations and performance rituals. Her performances create a space for queer resistance, highlighting a diverse range of gender expressions and rejecting rigid, conventional portrayals of femininity.



*Figure 1.* Chappell Roan and her band performing at Hinterland Music Festival in coordinated nun costumes.

One of Roan's most talked-about and significant moments occurred at the Hinterland Music Festival, where she wore a nun costume that ignited discussions about queerness and religious imagery (Figure 1). Some viewed the costume as a way of sexualizing religious figures, interpreting it

as a bold political statement. However, in an interview, Roan downplayed any deeper meaning to her costumes, stating, “I just think it’s just not serious... I love that fans find such deep meanings to things, and I’m just like, ‘I don’t know, I thought I looked hot.’ Like, I don’t know if it’s anything more than that” (Santino, 2024, para. 5). This statement highlights Roan’s irreverent approach to religious symbolism, opting instead to use it as a means of expressing queerness and rebellion. This nerve reflects camp aestheticism’s ability to destabilize the ‘serious’, utilizing parody to challenge sacred societal symbols. Her embrace of drag culture in this context aligns with her support for drag performers, as she mentioned to *People* in 2023: “It’s just a great way to engage the local queer community... I encourage people to tip the queens” (Kaplan, 2023, para. 20). By featuring local drag queens in her shows, Roan fosters a space for queer visibility and actively promotes the redistribution of resources within the community. Her dedication to drag culture, while respecting its roots, showcases a genuine appreciation for the artistry and politics inherent in drag performance.



*Figure 2.* Chappell Roan performing at Coachella in a butterfly wing costume.

The visual rhetoric of camp aestheticism is especially important in Roan’s work. Her butterfly wing costume at Coachella amplified femininity to near-absurdity, transforming glamour into parody (Figure 2). Viewed through Butler’s concept of gender performativity, this exaggeration reveals gender as something enacted, not natural. This approach connects Roan to pop icons like Madonna and Lady Gaga, both celebrated figures in the queer community, whose use of spectacle and gendered performance highlights the constructed nature of celebrity and identity (Cho, 2009). Roan’s exaggerated displays similarly blur the lines between persona, image, and identity, following in

the tradition established by these icons. Like her predecessors, Roan uses camp aestheticism to cultivate queer spaces that invite audiences to imagine new possibilities for identity and expression.

Roan's take on drag culture and camp aesthetics fits into a larger tradition in the music industry, linking her with other queer artists like Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X. For example, Ocean's work showcases a rejection of traditional masculinity and heteronormativity in modern R&B and hip-hop (Dhaenens & De Ridder, 2015, p. 284). He mixes genres and themes that challenge mainstream narratives, using his platform to address socio-cultural issues and explore queerness. Similarly, in his song "Old Town Road," Lil Nas X redefined the boundaries of country music, a genre often seen as conservative and predominantly white, by fully embracing his identity as a Black, openly gay artist (Hansen, 2021, p. 67). His bold exploration of queer identity, especially in his song "Montero," challenges Judeo-Christian values and gender norms, presenting a vision of Afrofuturism that is both personal and politically significant (Talbot & Taylor, 2023, p. 48). Like Roan, Ocean and Lil Nas X leverage their art to challenge societal and industry constraints, creating a space where queerness can be expressed freely and unapologetically. Roan's camp aesthetics and engagement with drag culture play a vital role in this ongoing movement, prompting a reassessment of gender, identity, and expression in popular culture. At the same time, who she is and where she comes from shape how she presents queerness, adding another layer to her music and performances.

### **Whiteness and Midwest Identity**

Chappell Roan's identity as a white, Midwestern artist significantly shapes her portrayal of queerness, offering a unique perspective that intertwines her regional roots with her experiences as a queer individual. The 'Midwest Princess' idea is central to Roan's image, providing a framework to navigate her queerness while reclaiming stereotypes linked to femininity and small-town life. Small-town America is often associated with conservative values, strict gender roles, and the idea of the nuclear family as the foundation of society. By embracing and challenging the 'Midwest Princess' identity, Roan critiques the restrictive nature and contradictions of 'traditional American values.' Her over-the-top, campy performances emphasize the clash between the idealized vision of wholesome small-town life and the reality of its social limitations, allowing space for queerness and individuality to thrive.

Roan's whiteness also shapes her engagement with queer themes, especially when compared to queer artists of colour. In the context of queer identity, whiteness can provide a certain level of



privilege, particularly within a predominantly white music industry. As Lee (2020) points out, white privilege often protects white LGBTQ+ individuals from the social oppression faced by queers of colour, granting them a degree of freedom to express non-normative gender and sexuality in ways that may be less accessible to those who also navigate racial oppression and a racialized existence (p. 151). For artists like Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean, navigating the intersection of race and queerness is a more complex journey. While Chappell Roan's portrayal of 'authentic' queerness is widely celebrated, Black male artists often struggle to garner similar recognition. Racism influences which queer narratives are deemed 'valid,' with white queerness frequently positioned as the norm. Lil Nas X experienced backlash for his openly queer expressions in "Montero," while Frank Ocean's queer identity has sparked mixed reactions, highlighting how authenticity in queerness is often viewed through a racial lens in mainstream culture.

Roan's identity as a white, Midwest artist only shapes how she presents queerness on stage and in her music but also influences the ways she connects with her audience. Her background and experiences inform her perspective, providing a platform for her to engage with fans in ways that are more authentic and intentional. This foundation of identity and self-expression sets the stage for understanding how Roan impacts queer pop culture and fosters a dedicated, supportive fan community.

### **Roan's Impact on Queer Pop Culture and Fan Engagement**

Chappell Roan has become a significant figure in queer pop culture, primarily due to her talent for cultivating a strong, supportive community for her LGBTQ+ fans. Through her music and personal engagement, Roan promotes self-expression and solidarity, creating an environment where fans feel acknowledged and accepted. Roan's authenticity and openness have positioned her as a role model for many in the LGBTQ+ community, giving a voice to those who might otherwise feel unheard.

Roan's impact goes beyond her music; she has become a beacon of empowerment and self-determination. A pivotal moment in this journey occurred when Roan addressed the issues of fan entitlement and harassment in a couple of candid TikTok videos, directly engaging with her millions of followers. She established clear boundaries, stating, "I don't care that abuse and harassment, stalking, whatever, is a normal thing to do to people who are famous or a little famous... I don't give a f--k if you think it's selfish of me to say no for a photo, or for your time, or a hug"

(Daw, 2024, para. 2). This honest, unfiltered response struck a chord with many of her followers, who voiced their support for her right to privacy and safety. However, a vocal minority criticized her for not adhering to the expectations of celebrities, claiming that being a pop star necessitates sacrificing personal space and privacy (Daw, 2024).

This controversy highlights the intricate relationship between artists and their fans, often described as parasocial attachment. This phenomenon arises when a fan forms a one-sided emotional bond with a media figure, sometimes leading to unrealistic expectations and behaviours (Hayman, 2024). For femme celebrities like Chappell Roan, these dynamics are further complicated by societal expectations rooted in heteropatriarchal norms, which often portray women as always nurturing and emotionally available. Roan actively pushes back against this idea by establishing clear boundaries with her fans and challenging the notion that she must always be available to meet their emotional needs.

## **Conclusion**

Chappell Roan challenges traditional norms in pop music by fully embracing her queer identity, pushing back against societal expectations, and fostering inclusive environments for marginalized communities. Through her vibrant performances, striking aesthetics, and unapologetically queer lyrics, Roan empowers LGBTQ+ audiences. Tracks like “Pink Pony Club” and “Good Luck, Babe!” critique societal standards and ignite discussions about queer identity within mainstream culture, demonstrating that pop music can serve as a space for both entertainment and cultural intervention.

Roan’s impact extends beyond music, providing visibility to queer individuals where they have often been overlooked. Her ascent to fame as a pop artist is especially significant at a time with such anti-LBGTQ+ and anti-trans sentiments. Roan demonstrates that queer identities can exist in mainstream cultural spaces and generate both resistance and representation by displaying a very visible, unapologetic queerness. Her work serves as an example of how pop music can serve as a platform for social commentary. In addition to providing entertainment, it defies heteronormative norms and promotes community among marginalized audiences.

Additionally, Roan demonstrates that queerness is a public, performative practice with cultural and political significance in addition to being a private identity through her use of camp aestheticism, drag aesthetics, and performative gender challenges. She encourages audiences to

challenge constructive norms, affirms a range of gender expressions, and fosters queer community solidarity. By providing visibility, affirmation, and inspiration during a time when such representation is both vital and politically charged, her music continues to influence queer pop culture. Building on the foundation Roan is laying, future studies could examine how camp aestheticism and drag culture transform perceptions of gender and sexuality in mainstream pop. As Roan sings in “Pink Pony Club,” “I’m gonna keep on dancing at the Pink Pony Club,” a declaration that captures the joy, defiance, and unapologetic visibility at the heart of her art.

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