

GLAAD, Logo finally issue statements addressing concerns of transphobia of RuPaul's Drag Race

By Mari

Published April 4, 2014 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/glaad-logo-finally-issue-statements-addressing-concerns-of-transphobia-of-rupauls-drag-race_n_13325.htm

Abstract

Drag icon RuPaul is no stranger to criticism, particularly over his continued use of transphobic slurs on his popular TV show RuPaul's Drag Race which is produced by the LGBT-centered Logo cable network. However, in March, he ignited a firestorm of backlash from within and outside the trans community by featuring a mini-game entitled "Female [...]"

Article



Figure 1. Rupauls contestants yucking it up after being told they will be using a transphobic slur in determining whether a person is a 'real' woman or a psycho case

Drag icon RuPaul is no stranger to criticism, particularly over his continued use of transphobic slurs on his popular TV show RuPaul's Drag Race which is produced by the LGBT-centered Logo cable network. However, in March, he ignited a firestorm of backlash from within and outside the trans community by featuring a mini-game entitled "Female or Shemale," on the show. Despite criticism of the segment echoing loudly throughout the web, the voice of the largest LGBT group for media advocacy, GLAAD, was nowhere to be heard. On March 29th, 12 days after the segment aired, GLAAD finally issue a statement on the issue:

The morning after the segment aired GLAAD staff reached out to Logo and shared our own concerns, as well as the feedback we heard from the trans community. We also talked directly to the producers of RuPaul's Drag Race.

The mistakes made in this segment should not be repeated. Words are important and have tremendous power. Since 1999 we have stated in our Media Reference Guide that anti-trans slurs are defamatory: "These words only serve to dehumanize transgender people and should not be used." The network and the show's producers heard that from us - and from those of you who spoke up.

Addressing the criticisms from many advocates that GLAAD was slow to respond to issue, the organization claims that engaging in education and dialogue took priority:

Some writers and trans advocates questioned our entire commitment to trans people because we did not post about this issue on our site immediately. Why was there not an immediate post? We know from past experience that dialogue and education are the most effective ways to create substantive and lasting change in the media, and today's statements are the beginning of new conversations with this network and this show.

However, the official statements from both the producers of Drag Race and Logo itself were lukewarm and non-committal to any changes going forward, and contained no apologies for their usage of the transphobic language. The Drag Race producers claim they "are newly sensitized" to the issues:

We delight in celebrating every color in the LGBT rainbow. When it comes to the movement of our trans sisters and trans brothers, we are newly sensitized and more committed than ever to help spread love, acceptance and understanding,

Logo's statement simply states that the concerns have been heard:

"We have heard the concerns around this segment. We are committed to sharing a diverse range of trans stories across all of our screens and look forward to featuring positive and groundbreaking stories of trans people in the future."

A check of Logo's press releases and current website provide no acknowledgement of the conversation with GLAAD, nor does the official website for RuPaul's Drag Race.

On the same day the statement from GLAAD was posted, board member Jennifer Finney Boylan wrote an extensive personal statement on the situation on her own blog. In it, she adds that Logo made further commitments to GLAAD in their dialogue:

"More important to me is a commitment LOGO made that is not reflected in their public statement--- that they are not going to using the word "t----" on any of their programming again, going forward. It will be GLAAD's responsibility to hold them to their word.

They've also committed to putting an end to other anti-trans language on their network."

However, Boylan, too, is not heartened by the official statements given by the Logo and Drag Race:

"But this statement did seem to me to be something of a non-apology, and that leaves me dispirited. "Newly sensitized" is great-- but you had to not be listening very hard to trans women in the first place

to have produced a segment like this and been blind to the way it would be received.”

Buzzfeed LGBT’s Tony Merevick recently pressed spokesman for Logo for a public statement regarding their commitment to eliminating anti-trans language from their programming, but the network representatives stuck hard to the party-line and refused to make a confirmation of the commitment made to GLAAD.

It does appear, at least, that GLAAD has at last been moved by the critical voices among trans advocates, and has not featured Drag Race in its daily “What To Watch” post since the controversy erupted.

Given both Logo and Drag Race’s quiet, ambivalent non-apologies, and RuPaul’s lengthy history of transmisogyny, it will be interesting to see if any real changes do occur going forward, and whether GLAAD will continue to press a key media partner like Logo if their commitments turn out to be little more than lip service.

Editor’s Note

On March 31st, former Drag Race contestant, Carmen Carrera wrote:

Although I am certain RuPaul’s Drag Race didn’t mean to be offensive, let this be a learning experience. I think the show has opened up and educated the minds of many people who were ignorant to the world of drag and has made equality and respect a possibility for those involved, not only as equal beings but as phenomenal artists. There has always been a huge presence of trans artists in the drag scene. “Shemale” is an incredibly offensive term, and this whole business about if you can tell whether a woman is biological or not is getting kind of old. We live in a new world where understanding and acceptance are on the rise. Drag Race should be a little smarter about the terms they use and comprehend the fight for respect trans people are facing every minute of today. They should use their platform to educate their viewers truthfully on all facets of drag performance art.

After Logo and GLAAD issued their statements, the Drag Race ran their segment, “You’ve Got She-Mail.”

Suggested citation

Mari. "GLAAD, Logo finally issue statements addressing concerns of transphobia of RuPaul’s Drag Race."

TransAdvocate, April 4, 2014.

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