

The Evolution of Voguing

Thesis: Changes in the dance form known as voguing reflect broader sociopolitical and cultural trends over the period of the early 1970s to the late 1990s. As the LGBTQ+ community gained more widespread acceptance and exposure in American society, voguing transitioned from the Old Way style to the New Way form, while also splitting off into Vogue Femme during the mid 1990s.

- I. Voguing is a highly stylized dance form that can be described as a blend between posing and movement. Some elements of voguing include long arms, femininity, fluidity, hand gestures that frame the face, hard angles, and awkward positioning of the body (Moore, 2014).
 - A. Voguing first emerged during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, which fostered the creation of the ballroom subculture.
 1. The nightlife and culture of Latinos and African American men at the time, who oftentimes dressed in feminine clothing or what would be referred to now as “drag,” was a core component of Harlem’s exotic nightlife (Arvanitidou, 2019).
 2. The ballroom scene emphasized issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation within heteronormative society (Arvanitidou, 2019).
 - B. As the conservative values of American society at the time forced LGBT culture to develop underground, balls were one of the few opportunities for LGBT people to come together (Arvanitidou, 2019).
 1. Voguing has a major role in balls, which often contain fashion and catwalk competitions.
 2. When competing in voguing dance-offs, the participants are judged by the complexity of their dance moves, attitude, costumes, and ingenuity (Arvanitidou, 2019).
- II. Voguing is characterized by dancers sensing a close rhythmic relationship with the musical or vocal accompaniment, becoming emotionally invested during a voguing routine, and asserting an individual voguing style (Moore, 2014).
 - A. As detailed by researcher John David Jackson in his article “The Social World of Voguing,” the physical components of voguing are generally as follows.
 1. Arm control and performance refers to arm gestures such as pointing demonstratively or presenting a pattern in the movements a competitor’s arms and hands will complete.
 2. Leg control and performance is any non-locomotive leg gesture, such as raising a bent leg up in counterpoint to an arm that points downward.
 3. Hand performance is any gesture, movement, or action that is executed by a voguer’s hands.

- B. There are three definable eras of voguing, all of which arose out of different societal contexts (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.).
 - 1. Old Way, which developed during the 1970s, places a heavy emphasis on copying movements from poses seen in high fashion magazines.
 - 2. New Way introduced both arm and leg performance aspects into the Old Way style during the 1980s.
 - 3. Vogue Femme brings a feminine interpretation to the Old Way and New Way forms and developed throughout the 1990s.

III. From a theoretical standpoint, voguing provides queer communities with the opportunity to express themselves through the form of dance.

- A. Voguing is a queer celebration, as well as a radical way to construct, embrace, show, and perform intersectional queer identities (Tente, 2020).
 - 1. Voguers simultaneously mock and glorify standardized ideals of beauty, sexuality, and class (Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017).
 - 2. Through dance, voguers bridge the divides between metaphor, social awareness, and creative invention (DeFrantz, 2016).
- B. Voguing intersects with societal notions of movement theory and touches upon mass media consumption.
 - 1. The dance form encapsulates the blending of the high fashion movement with postmodern dance (Moore, 2014).
 - 2. Capitalist symbols, like fashion houses or product brands, are taken over and given different symbolic meanings, particularly during balls (Tente, 2020).

IV. I will be evaluating how shifts in American attitudes toward the LGBT community from the 1970s through the 1990s led to the development of different voguing eras, with each decade being given individual attention.

- A. As put forward in Jeni Loftus' research article "America's Liberalization in Attitudes toward Homosexuality, 1973 to 1998," there are two predominant theories as to why the LGBT community gained acceptance over time from mainstream American society.
 - 1. The first theory, which argues that changing demographics over time resulted in shifting American attitudes toward homosexuality, has a basis in population statistics.
 - a) Between 1970 and 1997, the percentage of adults with at least a college degree more than doubled, while the percentage with less than a high school degree decreased. As people who have attended institutions of higher education tend to hold more favorable views of the LGBT community, this could explain changing societal attitudes.

b) Between 1973 and 1998, the number of people who lived on a farm when they were 16 years old decreased by half, while those who lived in a big city or suburb nearly doubled. Urban areas tend to be more liberal than rural areas, which could account for shifting American norms.

2. The second theory contends that changing attitudes toward homosexuality over the period of the 1970s to the 1990s were embedded within larger cultural ideological shifts.

a) Americans' attitudes regarding the morality of homosexuality became slightly more liberal from 1973 to 1976, became increasingly conservative through 1990, and have become more liberal since 1990.

b) Over the same 25-year period, willingness to restrict the civil liberties of homosexuals declined steadily, with the only departure being a brief increase in negative attitudes in the late 1980s.

B. For my argument, I will be focusing more heavily on the sociopolitical developments that occurred in American society that coincided with softening attitudes toward the LGBT community.

V. The emergence of the gay liberation movement, along with loosening societal standards toward gender norms and sexuality defined the decade of the 1970s.

A. The gay liberation movement was jumpstarted in June of 1969 when police raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City. The incident sparked several nights of rioting, and the Stonewall Riots initiated a flurry of organizing that soon spread across the country (Gross, 2001).

1. In 1970, the first "Gay Liberation Day March" was held in New York City (GLSEN, 2019).

2. In 1973, the board of the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from its official list of psychiatric disorders (GLSEN, 2019).

B. The book *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* details the history of the LGBT community in America throughout the 20th century.

1. The 1970s was a period of explosive growth for the LGBT community as thousands came out and joined the gay liberation movement, and commercial, political, religious, cultural, and social institutions sprang up across the United States.

2. These institutions cultivated a growing sense of community identity and spread the word to a new generation of young people.

VI. Voguing emerged from the resurgence of the ballroom scene in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and gay liberation movement (Junkes, 2017).

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A. Old Way directly emulates the glamour and posing of high fashion models in Vogue Magazine (Arvanitidou, 2019).

1. The formation of lines, symmetry, and precision in the execution of formations with graceful, fluid-like action is characterizable of Old Way (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.).

2. Old Way movements have often been compared to the image and regality of Egyptian hieroglyphics (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.).

B. As the LGBT community achieved a level of societal exposure unlike ever before, voguing became a way to express both dissatisfaction and amusement with American culture.

1. Old Way reflects the increasing accessibility of high fashion magazines and clothing to the American public. As voguers mimicked the poses that models often performed in photoshoots, they pulled from cultural touchstones at the time to achieve their art.

2. However, Old Way also mocks the stiffness of heteronormative American culture through dance, especially as the LGBT community began to emerge more fully into mainstream society.

VII. The decade of the 1980s saw a brief increase in negative attitudes toward the LGBT community, which impacted the development of the New Way form of voguing. A. The emergence of AIDS, the rise of the religious right, and the election of a social conservative as president in the 1980s affected the trajectory of the gay liberation movement (Loftus, 2001).

1. During the early 1980s, the appearance of an unknown disease (that mostly affected homosexuals and drug users in its early days) was discounted by President Ronald Reagan (Junkes, 2017).

2. As many members of the ballroom scene had no opportunity to achieve financial security (due to both racial and gender barriers), many voguers earned their money as sex workers and therefore were in a constant state of risking an infection with HIV/AIDS (Junkes, 2017).

3. Mass media in the United States introduced HIV/AIDS as “the gay cancer” or gay plague to their audiences and thereby helped to shape a new demonizing discourse on homosexuality (Junkes, 2017).

B. By the late 1980s, hundreds of thousands of activists took part in the National March on Washington to demand that President Ronald Reagan address the AIDS epidemic. Although AIDS had first been reported in 1981, it is not until the end of his presidency that Reagan speaks publicly about the disease (PBS, 2020).

VIII. New Way emphasizes contortionism, dramatism, and hand performance in response to the chaotic context in which the LGBT community was existing during the 1980s. A. Lightning fast hand motions, whirling arms, swoops, spins on the ground, and improbable contortions are highlighted heavily in New Way (Susman, 2000).

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1. New Way is also characterized by rigid movements coupled with "clicks" (limb contortions at the joints) and "locks" (fragmented gestures that appear to lock into place) (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.).
 2. Athletic and gymnastic movements are also present in New Way, such as head or shoulder stands, spins, and flips.
- B. With the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis, along with a reversal in trends in LGBT acceptance at the time, voguers evolved the Old Way form to express a profound sense of turmoil and loss.
1. As detailed in Christina Tente's thesis '*...and just set that body on fire!*', *Posthuman perspectives on the body, becomings, and sticky encounters in vogue femme.*, voguing is a cathartic way to deal with collective trauma, protest against inequalities, and produce counter-knowledge and counter narratives.
 2. Tente also notes how a crucial element of voguing is a focus on the body's presence and consciousness, which helps to define the space it will occupy. Particularly during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, voguing provided LGBT people with a channel to express changing societal ideas about LGBT bodies.

IX. As American society began to disassociate the HIV/AIDS crisis and gay men in the early 1990s, and gay culture became more accessible to a willing national audience, the LGBT community gained more widespread acceptance from the American public.

- A. Madonna's hit single "Vogue," released in 1990, was inspired by voguers of the late 1980s and brought voguing into the limelight in an unprecedented fashion. 1. Not only did Madonna draw from the ballroom scene to produce the song itself and the music video for "Vogue," but she also hired prominent ballroom figures to choreograph her 1990 Blond Ambition World Tour (Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017).
2. Madonna's 1990 MTV Awards performance of "Vogue" was one of the first representations of voguing on mainstream American television.
 3. Madonna managed to fit herself in along voguing's development, creating a legacy of voguing that remains synonymous with the pop star herself (Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017).
- B. The documentary film *Paris Is Burning*, released in 1990, details the lives of voguers living in New York City during the late 1980s.
1. *Paris Is Burning* spawned debates in the academic world and further

invigorated dialogues, especially among gender and queer theorists, who sought to identify what the ballroom culture's politics were and to what extent it was subversive against mainstream culture (Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017).

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2. As *Paris Is Burning* highlighted a relatively niche community at the time, the documentary introduced a relatively underground facet of the LGBT community to a mainly straight and white American audience.

X. Vogue Femme's emergence in the mid-1990s represents the culmination of the radical gains that the LGBT community achieved over the past decades, along with broader cultural shifts in the expression of femininity.

A. Vogue Femme can be described as a whimsical and spectacular celebration of exaggerated and hypersexual femininity performed by any gender (Tente, 2020).

1. The dance form exaggerates traditionally feminine movements influenced by ballet, jazz, modern dance, and iconic female performers (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.).

2. Vogue Femme is defined by five components: the duckwalk, catwalk, hands, floorwork, and spins/dips (Very Real Reality, 2016).

3. Vogue Femme performances range from dramatics (which emphasizes stunts, and tricks) to soft (which emphasizes a graceful, beautiful, and easy flow between the five elements) (Van Vogue Jam, n.d.).

B. Vogue Femme's convergence with cultural shifts in gender and sexuality norms is best represented by the form's versatility and performance of femininity. 1. Vogue Femme partly takes place through the appropriation and radical subversion of clichés and pre-inscribed notions as to what counts as feminine in a heteronormative context (Tente, 2020).

2. Tente also highlights how Vogue Femme celebrates elements of femininity that society has traditionally directed people to feel embarrassed of and hide.

XI. The evolution of voguing over the period of the 1970s to the 1990s is critical to evaluate from a sociopolitical and cultural standpoint, as broader ideological shifts allowed the LGBT community to express themselves both through underground subcultures and in mainstream American society.

A. Voguing continues to exist in queer spaces, and while being more commodified than in past decades, the dance form continues to develop with regional, national, and international interpretations.

B. Furthermore, as academia has often ignored the contributions of the LGBT community to American society, highlighting the intersection of queer studies with American culture is important to the conservation of queer history.

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Rhetorical Situation Memo

Audience

The journal I have selected for my audience is *Sprinkle: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, which is a multidisciplinary undergraduate student journal that publishes work relating to gender, sexuality, body politics, and queer history. I chose *Sprinkle* as I believe the publishers of the journal will understand what I'm addressing in my article, which is a fear I had when looking at other undergraduate journals to submit to. I want my article to contribute to the larger body of knowledge being organized on the topic of queer history, and I believe that *Sprinkle* is devoted to that mission. While I think that readers of *Sprinkle* are informed as to the broader developments in queer history/culture, I would be surprised if they were knowledgeable about voguing's development in the late 20th century. I don't know too much about the journal itself, however the submission guidelines are extremely permissive, and coincidentally align with the formatting style I was going to use throughout my paper anyways. I did search through *Sprinkle's* online database and could not find any submissions on the topic of voguing, so I'm excited to be writing about a topic that hasn't been covered yet in *Sprinkle's* prior volumes.

Context

As I've realized when writing my outline, I will need to include a lot of background on the topic of voguing before I discuss the main argument of my article. I've discussed my journal article topic with a few of my friends, and judging by their confusion as to what voguing is and how it relates to the LGBT community, it seems that providing historical and theoretical context at the start of my journal article will be useful before describing the evolution of voguing over time. I tried to include as much background as possible in the beginning of my outline, which does come across as a bit substantial to comb through, especially for someone with no

knowledge on the topic. In this regard, I will need to balance the amount of background information I have with the evidence I've collected to support my argument, which I'm somewhat concerned about at this point in the drafting process.

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Situating the Argument

One of the sources I use throughout my argument is a research article by Jeni Loftus titled "America's Liberalization in Attitudes toward Homosexuality, 1973 to 1998." Loftus' piece helps me to situate my argument as it provides a framework from which to evaluate changes in American attitudes toward the LGBT community over the period of the 1970s through the 1990s. In my outline, I note how I will be expanding upon one of Loftus' theories regarding how the LGBT community gained mainstream acceptance in American society, and likewise confirm (throughout the rest of my outline) why this theory is likely to be true. Furthermore, I also cite information from the book *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* throughout my article, and use it to situate my argument as it provides meaningful historical context. I expand upon this source in particular by detailing how Old Way relates to societal developments in the 1970s, particularly the onset of the gay liberation movement and important historical events such as the Stonewall Riots.

Honor Pledge

I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment/examination.

Changes/Updates

The feedback I received from my peer review was extremely helpful, and besides pointing out some grammatical errors that I needed to edit, I also made each voguing section of my paper into a separate numeral to keep my article's flow consistent. I also tried to highlight more of the sources I utilized heavily throughout my outline, however with my topic, I found that I had to pull from a variety of sources to get a clear image of voguing's development, as academic

research on the topic is lacking.