

Reminiscence and Resilience in the Voices of Older LGBTQ+ Drag Performers

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This qualitative study explores the life stories of 21 LGBTQ+ drag performers in the United States aged 50 and older. Through semi-structured interviews grounded in life story methodology and supported by timeline mapping, the study investigates how participants make meaning of drag performance, gender identity, and chosen kinship over time. Drawing on grounded theory, timeline mapping, and feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, the research uncovers themes of resilience, performative identity, familial acceptance and rejection, and intergenerational transmission of values. Participants described drag as a powerful site of self-affirmation and protective expression, often referred to as “armor.” Their narratives also revealed shifting relationships with gender performance and identity integration across the lifespan. The findings shed light on how drag performers navigate aging within a youth-focused culture while continuing to make significant contributions to LGBTQ+ history, activism, and community care. The study contributes to gerontological and queer scholarship by centering the voices of older LGBTQ+ drag performers and suggesting new directions for intergenerational and intersectional research.

Keywords: life story; chosen family; drag performers; queer theory; aging LGBTQ+

“While simple enough to define—a form of entertainment in which performers wear elaborate costumes and transgress gender expectations—drag poses a much more slippery question: Why? What purpose does the act of transformation serve?” — Miss J Alexander

While drag as an art form has existed for centuries, the drag queen phenomenon entered mainstream conscious-

ness with the 2009 debut of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Since then, the franchise has expanded globally, with national editions airing in countries such as Canada, France, Australia/New Zealand, Thailand, South Africa, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Mexico, the Philippines, Spain, and Brazil, among others (Barra et al., 2020; Hermes & Kardolus, 2022). Scholars emphasize that the show has played a central role in professionalizing drag and transforming it from a niche subculture into a worldwide entertainment industry (Willard & Dubrofsky, 2024; Zaslow, 2022). The mainstream success of *Drag Race* has also elevated drag performers into broader cultural arenas: Contestants have appeared on Broadway and at Carnegie Hall, modeled during New York and Paris Fashion Weeks, and developed original television programs for networks such as HGTV and HBO (Baxter et al., 2022; Ward, 2020). Collectively, this body of work illustrates how *Drag Race* has reshaped global understandings of drag, establishing it as both a cultural export and a powerful platform for queer visibility.

The backlash, unsurprisingly, has intensified. In the past few years, Montana has barred drag story hours in public schools and libraries, public universities in Texas have sought to prohibit drag performances on campus, and Tennessee has enacted one of the nation’s most sweeping restrictions on public drag performance. These laws and proposals reflect what Davis and Kettrey (2022) describe as the cultural polarization surrounding drag, particularly

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Conflicts of Interest

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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when events such as drag story hours are framed as threats to children. Scholars also note that legislative efforts often treat drag as inherently “adult” entertainment, thereby marginalizing its long-standing community and educational functions (Kammerer et al., 2025). Despite these attacks, drag performers continue to sustain a vibrant, historic presence within queer communities (Knutson et al., 2018; Taylor & Rupp, 2004) while also cultivating wider fan bases through mainstream media visibility (Feldman & Hakim, 2020). As a result, social scientists are increasingly examining drag through multiple theoretical lenses, including status, empowerment, resilience, advocacy, and cultural politics (Balint et al., 2025; Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Hopkins, 2004).

Previous Research

Drag is most often defined in scholarship as a form of theatrical performance where individuals adopt costumes, makeup, and stylized personas to present exaggerated expressions of gender. This performative practice highlights the constructed nature of gender roles by staging them as visible and often parodic acts (Newton, 1972; Rupp & Taylor, 2003). Although drag has historically been associated with cisgender gay men, contemporary performers represent a wide spectrum of sexual and gender identities (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d.; O’Brien, 2018). Because of this diversity, as Knutson, et al. (2018) note “a singular definition for *drag queen* is lacking in the literature,” and no single definition can fully capture the range of drag practices; however, most scholars agree that its central feature is the intentional enactment of gender as performance (Brammer & Ginicola, 2017; Greaf, 2015).

Scholarship on drag performance spans multiple disciplines and highlights its significance for identity, gender critique, and community life. Many researchers describe drag as a performative challenge to conventional gender norms and as a form of queer political expression. For instance, Moncrieff and Lienard (2017) interpret the exaggerated femininity of drag queens as a costly social signal, suggesting that the willingness to adopt outlandish costumes and risk harassment demonstrates both resilience and status within LGBTQ+ communities. Classic ethnographies similarly underscore this dual nature of drag. Newton (1972), for example, observed that performers often encountered stigma and discrimination, yet those who succeeded on stage also achieved social prestige and recognition within gay subcultures.

Research in counseling and psychology has emphasized the psychosocial dimensions of drag. Knutson et al. (2018) interviewed cisgender gay drag queens and identified motivations and stressors, noting that performers often found social support, creative fulfillment, and empowerment through drag while also experiencing discrimination and performance anxiety. In a related study, Knutson et al. (2020) reported that participation in drag prompted many individuals to reflect on gender expectations and identity, with several describing the

interview as the first time they had considered the gendered implications of drag performance in depth. Taken together, these studies suggest that drag can function as both a source of resilience and empowerment and a site where performers negotiate minority stress and questions of gender identity within LGBTQ+ communities.

In recent years, research on drag performers has expanded and diversified across several key areas:

- **Identity and Expression.** Studies have examined the meaning of drag in relation to sexual and gender identity, fluidity, and subversiveness (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Knutson et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2018) as well as the reasons for becoming a drag performer (Hopkins, 2004; Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017; Taylor & Rupp, 2004).

- **Performance and Representation.** Scholars have analyzed drag as advocacy and sociopolitical expression (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Rupp et al., 2010; Rupp & Taylor, 2003), as hyperbolic depictions of femininity (Friedman & Jones, 2011; Taylor & Rupp, 2004), and in relation to hypermasculinity and stereotypes (Bishop et al., 2014).

- **Stigma, Community, and Audience.** Other work addresses experiences of marginalization, discrimination, violence, and internalized bias (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Newton, 1979; Stotzer, 2009), interactions between drag performers and the broader gay community (Bishop et al., 2014; Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017), the role of chosen family and social support (Levitt et al., 2018), and the influence of audiences on performance (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Hankins, 2015).

- **Health and Well-Being.** Finally, researchers have focused on resilience, self-care, protective factors, and mental health (Knutson et al., 2021; Knutson et al., 2018; Knutson & Koch, 2019) as well as patterns of alcohol and drug use within drag communities (Tillewein & Kruse-Diehr, 2021).

Although research on drag performers has grown in scope and diversity, life story approaches that focus on subjective experience and identity formation remain relatively rare (Knutson & Koch, 2019; Levitt et al., 2018). Newton (1979) conducted one of the earliest ethnographic studies, showing that performers sustained an internal sense of self while projecting an external persona. Her foundational work opened the door to deeper explorations of drag subjectivities, yet few scholars have pursued this path. Notable exceptions include Luten’s (2023) narrative study of drag queens of color, which traced how personal histories shaped both LGBTQ+ identities and drag personas, and Hopkins’s (2004) interviews with drag queens that examined persona development alongside the rewards and challenges of performance.

More recent work has expanded globally: Caruana (2025) explored self-transformation and disclosure in Malta, while Sopitarchasak (2023) investigated how Thai

performers connected drag narratives with experiences of discrimination and support. In the United States, Knutson et al. (2018) highlighted the psychological dimensions of drag, noting the interplay of performance anxiety, discrimination, social loss, and community support. Finally, Chapman et al. (2021) and Donorfio et al. (2022) extended this approach to older drag performers, documenting how drag expression changes across the lifespan and how participants experience both resilience and “dragism,” or age-related stigma within drag communities.

In summary, ethnography, narrative inquiry, and qualitative interviews have provided important ways to document and analyze the life stories of drag performers. These approaches have yielded insights into identity formation, persona development, the evolution of drag across the life course, and the interplay between individual experience and broader social forces. Life story methods underscore the value of allowing performers to narrate their lives in their own words, making visible how social structures shape identity while also revealing the strategies and creativity through which drag artists contest and reimagine those structures.

Purpose of Current Study

Although scholarship on drag has expanded significantly, the voices of LGBTQ+ drag performers over the age of 50 remain largely absent. As Hanson and Antheous (2022) observe, “These queens of a certain age possess an inimitable mastery of the art but often remain unsung heroines in an increasingly youth-focused drag culture” (p. 9). With many older performers aging out of public view or passing on, we stand at a critical moment to preserve their stories before they are lost. This study aims to illuminate the lived experiences of more than 20 older LGBTQ+ drag performers between the ages of 50 and 90. It also explores how their personal histories, both in and out of drag, reflect broader social, cultural, and political shifts. Grounded in life story methodology, this project draws on qualitative, semi-structured interviews to trace how drag expression evolves across the lifespan and shape’s identity, resilience, and community. These narratives capture a rich and ongoing history of queer life and performance, challenging assumptions that drag is solely a contemporary or youth-driven art form. By centering the experiences of older LGBTQ+ drag performers, this research contributes to a more inclusive and intergenerational understanding of LGBTQ+ history and cultural memory.

Research Design

Theoretical Considerations

Several theoretical and ethical considerations guided this study. As early as 1963, Robert Butler introduced the concept of “life review,” observing that “the personal sense

and meaning of the life cycle are more clearly unfolded by those who have nearly completed it” (p. 72). For this project, we defined older drag performers as individuals aged 50 and above, a threshold consistent with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and other aging-focused organizations. While this cutoff does not imply retirement or the end of one’s career, it allowed us to include participants with meaningful life experience across multiple generational cohorts. Our goal was to examine how these individuals reflect on identity, aging, and drag performance over time.

Two central challenges shaped our approach. First, we confronted our own positions of privilege as researchers. Engaging with individuals whose lives and identities are often more marginalized than our own required care, reflexivity, and accountability. As Lakritz (1995) has noted in his discussion of privileged voices speaking about others, these moments are “risky incursions on the uncommon grounds of groups that have not been accorded the authority to speak for themselves and on whose behalf these writers have chosen to speak” (p. 3). Similarly, Alcoff (1995) has expressed caution about the complexities of “speaking for others,” particularly across lines of race, gender, sexuality, and power. Feminist research, she argues, often carries a liberatory impulse, yet this very impulse can obscure the structural imbalances it seeks to challenge.

Second, we grappled with the epistemological questions underlying life story research. As Scott (1991) has articulated in “The Evidence of Experience,” feminist scholarship must interrogate how subjectivity is produced and how intersecting structures of power shape experience. Drawing on her analysis of Samuel R. Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water*, Scott has illustrated how personal narratives, particularly those emerging from queer and racially marginalized lives, can serve as evidence of alternative values, practices, and social worlds. Such stories, she has argued, challenge dominant narratives that frame heterosexuality, binary gender roles, and scientific progress as inevitable or natural.

Following this tradition, our study sought to document and honor the alternative structures of meaning embodied in the lives of older LGBTQ+ drag performers. Rather than imposing a preexisting narrative arc, we allowed participants to articulate their identities and experiences in ways that resist or reconfigure normative frameworks. We did not assume their lives conformed to, or departed from, heteronormative trajectories; instead, we created space for diverse and conflicting claims to identity and meaning.

Methodology

Guided by an interpretive framework, this study explored the subjective realities of older LGBTQ+ drag performers and how they constructed meaning in the world through drag expression, examining the symbolic systems and interpretive processes that shaped their identities,

actions, and interactions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Nickerson, 2024).

Given the limited research on older LGBTQ+ drag performers within the social sciences, grounded theory was selected as the primary methodological approach. Grounded theory is an inductive approach that is particularly suited for exploratory work and encourages the development of theory grounded in participants' lived experiences, rather than seeking generalizable findings and extending preexisting theoretical models (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach allowed for open-minded and flexible inquiry, with analysis guided by emergent themes rather than predetermined categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through this discovery-oriented process, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of how drag performers narrate identity development across the lifespan and how their stories contribute to broader conversations of gender, aging, and queer lives.

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, initial research questions were intentionally broad and became more focused through iterative coding and analysis as theoretical categories emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The guiding research questions were:

- What is the meaning of drag expression for older LGBTQ+ drag performers across the lifespan?
- How is drag expression integrated with one's persona over time?
- Is drag expression a mechanism for achieving a healthier or more integrated sense of self?
- How does drag expression intersect with experiences of "dragism," coping, resilience, and generativity?

Participants

Using grounded theory methodology as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), a purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who met the following eligibility criteria: (1) self-identified as a drag performer; (2) had experience performing in drag in any capacity; (3) self-identified as a sexual and gender minority (SGM); (4) were aged 50 or older; and (5) resided in the United States. All interviews were conducted in English.

The final sample consisted of 21 participants, who ranged in age from 50 to 90 years old (mean age of 60.9, $SD = 9.02$) and resided in various regions across the United States. All participants were volunteers recruited through word of mouth, personal networks, and social media outreach. All participants but one identified as a cisgender gay man. The racial and ethnic composition of the sample included 14 White participants, five Black participants, and two Latino participants. Participants' educational backgrounds varied: four had completed high school, nine had some college experience, seven held postsecondary degrees (Associate's 2; Bachelor's, 3; Master's, 1; Doctorate, 1), and one did not respond.

A wide range of drag genres were self-reported across the sample, with participants identifying 17 distinct

styles. The cited genres included comedy (8), glamour (7), art (7), historical (3), political (3), Black (2), movie (2), fierce (1), pop star (1), radical (1), tough (1), performance art (1), theatrical cabaret (1), Illusion (1), and classic (1).

Researchers

Although none of the research team members identified as drag performers, each has longstanding connections to drag communities through family, friends, and participation as audience members. The study was conceptualized and conducted by the first two authors, both of whom are faculty members in a Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, with expertise in gerontology, lifespan development, human diversity, and intergenerational relationships. As data analysis began, they invited two additional collaborators to join the project. One holds a graduate degree in women's studies and is a faculty member in a Department of English and Modern Languages; the other joined the team as an undergraduate researcher and has continued post-graduation. She holds a double major in Human Development and Family Sciences and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Together, we aimed to bring an interdisciplinary perspective to the project while remaining committed to listening deeply and respectfully to the full complexity of participants' life stories.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Following the university's IRB protocol, individuals who expressed interest in the study received an email invitation outlining the project. Those who wished to participate were directed to an online survey to complete a series of demographic questions used to determine eligibility. Eligible participants were then emailed a consent form, and an interview date and time were scheduled within one week.

All interviews were conducted virtually via Webex, a university-supported conferencing platform. The interviews were semi-structured and video-recorded with participants' consent. Participants were informed of their right to decline any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. They were encouraged to ask for clarification when needed and to elaborate on their responses to convey their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences fully. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share any additional information they deemed relevant that had not been addressed. Following their individual interviews, participants then completed an online survey that contained three psychosocial measures (results from the psychosocial measures are reported elsewhere). Upon the completion of all study components, participants received an Amazon gift card for their participation in the study.

The first and second authors conducted all interviews using a semi-structured conversation guide organized around nine thematic areas (see Table 1 for sample questions). The virtual format provided a unique window

into participants' personal spaces. Many shared meaningful objects associated with their drag personas (e.g., stilettos, performance photographs, rooms devoted to drag attire, and artwork), which offered rich visual context and added personal depth to their narratives. The opportunity to engage with these symbolic items allowed participants to express further the significance of drag in their lives and identities.

Grounded Theory Analysis, Life Review, and Timeline Mapping

Following grounded theory methodology, data collection, coding, and analysis occurred after each interview concurrently, using the three standard levels of analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Taken directly from the text and perspectives of the participants, the initial open coding analysis informed the development of a preliminary coding scheme by prioritizing the most significant and frequent categories for deeper analysis. This level of analysis preserved participants' terms while also capturing their significant meanings. Axial coding then explored the relationships between the emerging categories and subcategories, to identify conditions, contexts, and consequences, according to relevance and analytic sense. Last, selective coding was then used to further refine and integrate the categories around a core category and central theme. As analysis progressed through each interview, the research questions evolved in response to patterns and categories identified in the data.

The first two authors and a team of six student researchers coded and analyzed the data. Several techniques were used to enhance the rigor of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, the second author trained the team on the central tenets of grounded theory, provided an instruction guide, and analyzed the first interview to practice each level of coding. Second, the team jointly created a codebook with code definitions and inclusion/exclusion criteria, which was iteratively refined as new ambiguities arose. Third, as each coder independently coded each transcript and drafted a summary of their analysis, they were directed to keep "reflective notes" (also called memo-writing; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to capture their analytic processes, which included beliefs, thoughts, and insights about the data and project. Fourth, the team met regularly to "member check" by comparing interpretations and discussing discrepancies. Fifth, to increase reliability and deepen analytic insight, discrepancies and disagreements were discussed until the team reached consensus. Sixth, to enhance credibility, "reflexivity" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to help researchers become aware of potential bias and how their perspectives and social identity may shape their interpretation(s).

By the time theoretical saturation was reached (at participant 13), the research team noticed a compelling pattern in the interview responses: Many participants appeared to structure their narratives chronologically,

mirroring the arc of their lifespans. In response, one author recalled a graduate school technique that involved using timelines to support life story interviews. After revisiting this approach in the literature, the team chose to integrate "timeline mapping" into the study beginning with participant 14 (Kolar et al., 2015).

Timeline, or lifeline mapping, is a common technique in life history research (Adriansen, 2012) and has gained traction among qualitative researchers working with marginalized populations, particularly to explore resilience and facilitate trauma-sensitive interviewing (Berends, 2011; Kolar et al., 2015). As Bau (2024) explains, timelines help participants "identify key moments in their lives" by visually organizing "a chronology of important happenings or pinpoint[ing] specific changes that have occurred over time" (p. 1302). Robert Butler (1963) referred to this reflective process as "reminiscence," noting that older individuals often engage in a silent "life review" that may only become fully articulated when prompted (p. 67). Butler (1963) further defined the inner experience or mental process of life review as a natural process in which older adults recall their past experiences, evaluate them, and analyze them in order to achieve a more profound self-concept.

Life story research is one of the most commonly used approaches in qualitative research, and, as Lopez-Montero et al. (2022) note, "life stories are consolidated as one of the most important techniques within the biographical method" (p. 1). Building on Butler's (1963) foundational concept of "life review," life story approaches extend this practice into narrative form, situating individual memories within broader social and historical contexts. Scholars in narrative gerontology emphasize that constructing one's life as a story fosters meaning-making, coherence, and identity integration across the lifespan (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Kenyon et al., 2001; McAdams, 1993; McAdams et al., 2006). As a methodology, life story research has become a central tool in qualitative inquiry, offering a structured yet flexible way of accessing lived experience while allowing participants to make sense of identity, resilience, and adaptation in later life. By drawing from this lineage of life review and narrative gerontology, our study situates participants' accounts within a well-established framework.

Utilizing the timeline mapping tool enabled participants to guide the interview structure more actively while emphasizing visual chronology to help them reconstruct lived experiences. Participants were asked to walk through the major events and transitions of their lives, from childhood to the present, using age-based categories informed by the lifespan development training of the first two authors. Providing the timeline framework in advance encouraged deeper reflection and often led participants to raise key themes before interviewers prompted them. Any remaining questions were addressed at the end of the interview. Although no new themes

Table 1*Conversation Guide Areas and Sample Questions*

Category	Sample Questions
Attitudes and feelings surrounding drag expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you define drag? • How do you feel in drag versus out of drag? • Do you view being a drag queen as a profession, a hobby, part of your identity, a separate identity, or something else?
Role of gender in drag expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role does gender play in drag? • Do you feel you are purposefully trying to embody the epitome of the female when you are in drag? • Are you trying to create your own ideal of a female when you are in drag?
Positive and negative outcomes of drag expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways has drag expression positively and negatively impacted your life? • At different ages in your life? • Have you ever experienced “Dragism” (i.e., bias, discrimination, prejudice, ageism)?
Coping and resilience of drag expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does drag expression serve as a healthy coping or resilience mechanism for you? • Has it helped with: insecurities, alienation, bullying, oppression, stigmas, discrimination, victimization? • Has it helped with depression and/or suicide, and in what specific ways?
Family of origin relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your earliest memories of wanting to dress in drag? • Did you come out to anyone in your life that you were a drag queen? • Family Support? Parental Support? Sibling Support?
Drag community and chosen family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did/Do you mentor other drag queens? • Do you feel part of the LGBTQ+ community? • Do you define family differently as a drag queen?
Advocacy efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you used your role as a drag queen to support political activism? • Why or why not? • Specific examples/areas?
Knowledge gaps about what it means to be a drag queen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of misconceptions exist about what it means to be a drag queen in mainstream society and the LGBTQ+ community? • Do you believe health care providers have knowledge deficits around what it means to be a drag queen? • Are there specific “drag” interventions that can help fill provider knowledge gaps to better serve the health needs of the drag community?
How drag has changed during their lifetimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has drag changed over your lifetime? • Has the percentage of time you are X changed throughout your life? • Overall, what was the impact of drag on your life and your identity?
Other	Additional comments, stories, etc. of participants

emerged after theoretical saturation occurred, the research team completed the interviews with the remaining scheduled participants, resulting in a final sample of 21 participants. Please see Figure 1 for the timeline mapping tool used.

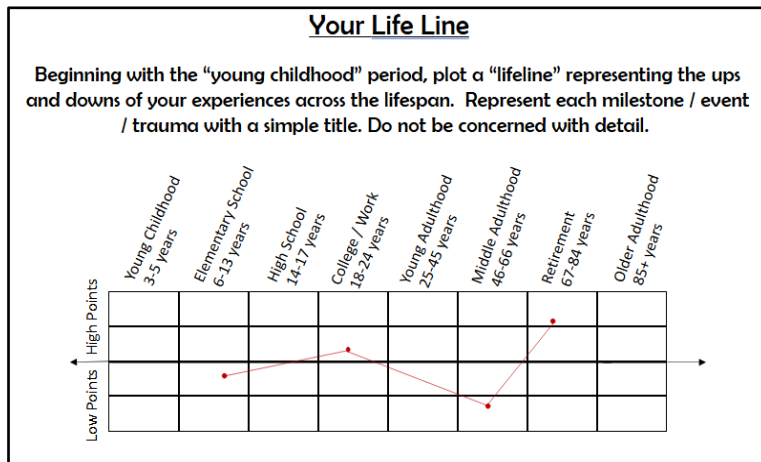


Figure 1. Timeline Mapping Tool.

Results

The findings of this study were grounded in life story interviews with LGBTQ+ drag performers aged 50 and older, whose narratives revealed complex experiences of identity formation, family relationships, chosen kinship, resilience, and performance. The results for this article were organized into two broad areas of analysis. The first drew inductively from participant narratives to identify key themes that emerged across the life course: early memories of gender expression, family dynamics, adolescent and adult challenges, the evolution of drag identity, and the central role of chosen family and community support. These accounts highlighted how drag served as both a refuge and a form of resistance, providing artists with a means of survival, self-expression, and affirmation. The second area engaged these findings through the lens of feminist and queer theory, exploring how participants' reflections resonated with concepts such as gender fluidity, performativity, and the transmission of queer history through gesture and ephemera. Together, these two frames of analysis highlight the depth and diversity of drag as a lived and evolving cultural practice from material and theoretical perspectives.

Themes

Family, Kinship, and Chosen Bonds

Participants offered complex narratives about their relationships with family members, especially parents, grandparents, and siblings. Most expressed admiration for their mothers, often describing them as emotionally supportive or as early role models. "I had a mother and three sisters that I grew up with and a strong matriarchal

lineage and grandmothers who were the power to me," one participant shared. Others described their mothers as graceful, hardworking, or fierce. One recalled, "My mother could cook. She was a magician, she was a doctor, she was a lawyer. She could do anything, and she had this elegance and grace about her that was just so fierce." Solidly two-thirds of participants stated that their mothers were accepting of their participation in drag.

In contrast, relationships with fathers were more often described as strained or rejective. Less than half of participants labeled their fathers as accepting of drag expression. Some participants recalled verbal abuse or efforts to enforce rigid masculinity: "The first thing my father told me to do [was] 'be a man'." Others noted emotional absence or shame. Still, a few described fathers who grew more accepting over time, including one who told his child on his deathbed, "You beat a different drum." Another participant shared, "He still asks, you know, how's your show?"

Extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, were often sources of support. One participant remembered his grandmother dressing him as the Wicked Witch for Halloween when he was seven or eight years old. Sibling relationships, when mentioned, were more variable; some were close; others marked by distance or disconnection.

In the absence of consistent familial support, many participants described the importance of chosen families and drag houses. These kinship networks serve as emotional lifelines, offering support, safety, and a sense of belonging. "I think like a lot of people do, [we] make our own family," said one participant whose biological relatives were incarcerated. Others described mentoring younger performers, celebrating birthdays together, or becoming deeply involved in each other's lives. "Chosen family and the need to nurture ...I am more in touch with being a mother than I ever would be a father."

Early Identity and Social Adversity

Many participants traced the roots of their drag identities to early childhood experiences. These moments were often playful, such as dressing up in family clothing, performing in school events, or admiring female vocalists. "I talked about dressing up in my dad's naval uniform or putting on ...my mother's high heels." These early expressions were often remembered as joyful and formative, though not always safe. Some participants described being reprimanded by adults, teased by peers, or bullied at school.

Adolescence and early adulthood introduced new challenges. Participants spoke of divorce, addiction, poverty, and instability within their family systems: several experienced intense bullying or physical violence. "My parents eventually divorced when I was 13.... That came

with some teasing and some bullying.” One participant was hospitalized for five days after an anti-gay attack; another was severely beaten. Others lived with a constant sense of vigilance. Some expressed gratitude for having avoided physical harm, though they recognized the risks endured by others.

Parental protectiveness, especially from mothers, was frequently expressed as concern for safety. One participant recalled being helped with makeup in fifth grade while his mother warned, “[First name], if your father found out about this...I don’t want to hear about it.” Another said, “My parents...refused to let me go to [NYC institution] for college.... they were worried I was going to die of AIDS.” These reflections illustrate how love and fear were often entangled in parental responses to gender expression.

Drag as Practice, Career, and Identity

Drag evolved along multiple trajectories across participants’ lives. For some, it became a full-time career. They recounted stories of operating bars, clubs, and theaters, of earning money and supporting families, and of navigating the high costs of drag materials, travel, and time. “Drag changes what you can do for sure.” Others viewed drag more as a creative or activist practice. Many emphasized the financial burden involved and advocated for fair compensation and a living wage for performers.

Across contexts, drag was described as a deeply expressive art form that allowed for fluidity, experimentation, and affirmation. In adulthood, many participants experienced drag as increasingly fused with their core identity. “I think it’s [drag persona] fully now a part of me...I don’t feel compartmentalized.” Another described their drag self as “an inherent part of [their] personality,” initially complementary to their internal self but eventually forming what they called an “integrated whole.” These reflections emphasized drag not as a mask or disguise but as a means of articulating inner truths.

Historical Memory and Collective Loss

Participants frequently referenced major historical events that shaped their lives and identities, particularly the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Nearly all shared emotionally charged accounts of caregiving, loss, and survival. Some had provided care to friends undergoing experimental treatments. Others described the profound grief of losing entire communities. “I met a whole new family of support and then lost all of them to AIDS.”

In addition to the AIDS crisis, participants discussed their connection to the Stonewall Riots, the Gay Liberation Movement, and broader LGBTQ+ civil rights struggles. These events were remembered not only as political milestones but as personal turning points that influenced their drag expression. For many, drag was not only a performance practice but also a form of resistance and activism.

Resilience and Emotional Armor

Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly described drag as a source of resilience. Many spontaneously used the metaphor of armor to articulate how drag allowed them to project strength and shield vulnerability. “I wouldn’t be [Drag Name] if I wasn’t resilient.” Another stated, “It opens up [my] ability to say what’s on [my] mind ...drag is like armor.” Others described drag as a mechanism for overcoming insecurity, shyness, and marginalization. “Fierce is like your armor ...nobody wants to challenge me.” The word armor was not prompted by the researchers in any of the interviews.

Some participants offered more nuanced takes, acknowledging that even armor has its limits. “I guess I have armor that is kind of more porous.” These reflections illustrate how drag enables both strength and softness, allowing performers to navigate a world that often invalidates or erases them, while still holding space for vulnerability. In these accounts, drag emerges not just as a costume or performance, but as a profound emotional technology: a means to build identity, cope with trauma, and cultivate joy.

Feminist and Queer Theories of Gender and Sexuality in the Lives of Older LGBTQ+ Drag Artists

At the time many of our participants began performing as drag artists, feminist and queer theories were challenging the perceived stability of categories such as sex, gender, and identity. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) marked a significant theoretical shift with implications still unfolding today. Butler describes bodies as containers of cultural influence and distinguishes between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance, arguing that these categories function independently within specific cultural contexts. Butler emphasized that gender is performative, and these performances become so deeply ingrained that we enact them subconsciously. Our interviews demonstrated how drag, as intentional gender performance, exposed the constructed nature of more conventional and often unexamined gendered behavior. “The idea of drag is total performance,” said one participant. Another reflected, “Everything is drag, who you choose to be every single day, depending on the outfit that you do, how much time you take with your hair. All of that is presenting who you are today. And for me, it can change from day to day.”

Three key concepts from feminist and queer theory emerged as central to our analysis and key to any analysis of drag, gender, and sexuality: (1) fluidity of drag as an identity, (2) gender as intentional performance, and (3) the queer power of ephemeral gestures.

Drag as a Fluid Identity

A dominant theme was the understanding of drag as a fluid and adaptive identity. One participant explained,

“Drag is when someone who would be expected to dress one way chooses to dress in a way that makes them appear different to others: different identity, gender, if you want to be that specific. Drag is dressing in a different gender than you identify with.” Others described drag as “changing your appearance to present as somebody else” or as a way to express multiple selves: “There is a male and a female in me. I’m learning to embrace both sides. I have the best of both worlds.”

Though drag manifested differently for each performer, there was widespread agreement that identity is fluid and contingent upon context, including time, location, and audience. Several participants described maintaining a boundary between drag and non-drag spaces, especially in private or familial settings. Many avoided presenting in drag at home or during public commutes, citing safety concerns or familial disapproval; in contrast, clubs, stages, and other LGBTQ+ spaces offered visibility, affirmation, and celebration.

For many participants, drag served as a medium for exploring and expanding identity. One participant shared that drag gave them “a little bit of extra freedom to sort of do stuff that [they] can’t do every day.” Some performers adopted hyper-feminine personas, while others opted for bearded, bald, or more traditionally masculine presentations. “Now we have bearded queens and bald-headed queens and bio [cisgender] queens and trans queens,” said one artist. “Everybody’s a drag queen now.” Participants often used drag to embody identities distinct from their own while simultaneously discovering elements of their internal selves.

Gender as an Intentional Performance

Participants frequently discussed drag as a form of gendered performance, separate from transgender identity or the historically accurate but problematic identity of “cross-dresser.” Many emphasized that their goal was not to be perceived as female but to present a persona with intention and impact. “Drag is about performance. If someone is doing it in private, they are trans or cross-dressing.” Another stated, “Drag is when a man dresses up as a woman and performs on stage. It’s about performance.” One participant elaborated, “When I dress in drag, I present as a female. I expect people to perceive me that way. It’s not that I want to be believed to be female. It’s what I’m presenting to people.”

Many drew inspiration from maternal figures, celebrities, and iconic women, shaping their personas around admired traits. For some, this process served as a critique of gender roles. As one performer explained, drag is “a creative expression that explores and explodes gender roles and expectations.” In the context of drag, such roles were actively exaggerated, questioned, and disrupted.

Gestures and Queer Ephemera

An unexpected point of resonance emerged with José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of*

Queer Futurity (2009). Muñoz theorizes that heteronormative systems sustain themselves by erasing queer histories, people, and contributions. Without institutional forms of documentation, such as published reviews, preserved recordings, or official archives, many LGBTQ+ lives go unrecorded. In response, Muñoz elevates gestures and ephemeral practices as crucial sites of queer resistance and survival. Therefore, drag performances, in this context, are not only events but also archives of history. Through references to older choreography, makeup styles, or signature expressions, performers transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and imagined futures. “Memories that remain after the actual live performance,” he writes, “are the queer ephemera...that function as a beacon for queer possibility and survival” (p. 74).

This insight resonated strongly with the age cohort in our study. Many participants emphasized their roles as mentors, teachers, and drag mothers. Nine explicitly referenced being part of a drag lineage, and several reflected on the responsibility of passing on knowledge to younger generations. Through storytelling, reminiscence, and embodied gestures, participants became stewards of queer history. These performances were not only homages to the past but also acts of futurity. The knowledge, emotions, and experiences embedded in each performance are remembered, adapted, and reimaged in ways that reflect changing cultural conditions.

Discussion

The present study examined how drag performers aged fifty and older perceive their identities and life experiences, as well as how their drag personas have been shaped over time. In response to calls by scholars such as Hanson and Antheus (2022) to examine how aging drag performers make meaning in a youth-focused culture, this research contributes to closing the gap in scholarship on older LGBTQ+ drag performers. Drawing on life story methodology and qualitative, semi-structured interviews, the study illuminated the affective, cognitive, motivational, and interpersonal meaning systems participants use to navigate their experiences. In doing so, it revealed how these individuals have shaped and been shaped by social, cultural, and political forces over their lifetimes.

One of the most significant findings centers on the protective function of drag. More than half of the participants described drag as a source of empowerment, confidence, and resilience. Drag served as a kind of armor: a transformative guise that helped participants overcome shyness, trauma, and marginalization, while providing a powerful outlet for self-expression. Participants described how drag allowed them to access bold, charismatic versions of themselves, often in contrast to the insecurities they felt in other areas of life. These findings align with emerging research that highlights drag as a creative outlet and therapeutic practice, fostering psychological well-being and community support (Chigliaro, 2025; Knutson,

et al., 2021). Knutson, et al., (2021) found that drag performers may experience higher rates of depression than the general population but they also note a strong inverse correlation with psychological resilience, underscoring drag's potential for cultivating well-being (Knutson & Koch, 2019).

The empowering dimensions of drag also offer a response to discrimination and ageism within queer communities. Participants shared that drag had helped them resist exclusion, bias, and what scholars have described as "dragism," discrimination and stigma targeted at drag performers, particularly older ones (Chapman et al., 2021; Donorfio et al., 2023). These findings align with broader research on minority stress, which highlights how LGBTQ+ individuals may face additional marginalization within their communities due to gender nonconformity or age (Bishop et al., 2014; Knutson et al., 2018).

Another central theme was the development and integration of identity. As participants aged, they described a merging of their drag personas with their internal identities. Drag was no longer something they "accessed" but something that became part of who they were. Participants rejected compartmentalization and described their drag selves and everyday selves as an "integrated whole." This merging invites further reflection, especially as participants articulated a sense of coherence and affirmation later in life that may provide additional insight into existing frameworks of identity formation.

Participants' early life memories revealed a rich history of gender play and performance. Imaginative costume use, school performances, and admiration for maternal figures or female celebrities often marked these early expressions. While these experiences were sometimes met with disapproval, they were also remembered as joyful and liberating. These findings resonate with recent scholarship on drag pedagogy, including programs such as Drag Queen Story Hour, which bring queer ways of knowing and playful expression into early childhood education (Keenan, 2021). Such approaches embrace the open-ended, imaginative qualities of drag as a form of queer praxis and a challenge to normative developmental expectations.

Family relationships, especially with mothers, were another prominent theme. Participants often recalled maternal figures with deep admiration for the "power" they exuded and described them as sources of inspiration for their drag personas. While paternal relationships were more mixed, some participants described a gradual evolution in their fathers' understanding and acceptance of drag. These findings suggest that family systems, even when complicated by absence or conflict, remain central to participants' life stories and the formation of identity (Bowen, 1978; Papero, 1990).

The significance of chosen family was affirmed repeatedly in participant narratives. Many described how drag families, including drag mothers, daughters, and siblings, provided emotional support, mentorship, and affirmation not always available from families of origin. These kinship structures, central to drag culture, reflect

broader LGBTQ+ practices of caregiving, resilience, and community-building (Hull & Ortyl, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018; Lewin, 1993). As older drag artists, many participants took their roles as mentors to younger performers seriously, passing on not only skills but also values and cultural knowledge.

These intergenerational relationships also point to the transfer of activist dimensions of drag (Donorfio et al., 2023; Donorfio et al., 2022). Participants shared stories of their involvement in LGBTQ+ civil rights movements, HIV/AIDS caregiving and advocacy, as well as other forms of political engagement. From the legacy of the Stonewall Riots to ongoing struggles for justice, participants positioned drag as both an art form and a form of resistance. In this way, their narratives reaffirm the historical and ongoing ties between drag performance and activism.

Feminist and queer theories provided an important framework for interpreting these findings. Concepts such as gender fluidity, performativity, and queer ephemera helped situate participant experiences within broader theoretical conversations. Participants articulated drag as an intentionally performed and evolving identity, aligned with Judith Butler's understanding of gender as a set of repeated acts. The work of José Esteban Muñoz on gesture and ephemeral knowledge further illuminated how drag stores and transmits queer cultural memory. Participants' stories, movements, and performances were revealed as carriers of both personal and collective history, gestures that refuse erasure and create space for queer futurity.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that drag is not simply a youthful or fleeting art form but a sustained, intergenerational practice that contributes to identity development, emotional resilience, and community life. By centering the voices of older LGBTQ+ drag performers, the research challenges ageist assumptions and offers a deeper, more inclusive understanding of queer cultural memory. These narratives insist on the value of lived experience and serve as a vital archive of queer history and possibility.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study must be acknowledged to guide and strengthen future research. First, all participants were volunteers, which may have introduced self-selection bias and skewed the findings. While the selective nature of the sample limits generalizability, the life stories shared offer valuable insights into identity development, lifespan adaptation, and the experiences of drag performers within a marginalized community. Second, racial and ethnic diversity in the sample was limited. Latine, Asian, and Native participants were underrepresented. Future studies should aim for a more balanced demographic to assess whether similar themes emerge across a wider range of cultural experiences. Additionally, most participants identified as cisgender gay men. Broader representation from the LGBTQ+ spectrum, including drag kings, would provide a

more inclusive understanding of drag as an evolving cultural practice. Although gender identity was not a central focus of this study, future research might further explore how individuals negotiate gendered expression across different contexts and over time.

Future studies would also benefit from a deeper focus on family dynamics and interpersonal acceptance. In particular, the Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory) offers a valuable framework for examining the effects of parental support and rejection over the lifespan (Rohner and Ali, 2025). According to these authors, few experiences have as far-reaching consequences as early acceptance or rejection by caregivers. Their work explores how these experiences shape later relationships, mental health, and self-perception. Including validated measures of parental acceptance and rejection in future research could help assess how family systems influence the development of drag performers.

Shared episodic events also warrant further study. This includes participant experiences with HIV/AIDS caregiving, activism, shifting norms in drag performance, the evolution of chosen family structures, and the rise of anti-trans legislation. These themes were rich but could be explored more fully in focused studies, especially as the generation most impacted by the AIDS crisis continues to age.

The timeline mapping tool used in this study also presents a promising method for future qualitative research. This visual and narrative-based approach helped participants situate key events within the broader context of their lives, leading to richer reflections and more nuanced storytelling. While the timeline structure in this study was based on lifespan developmental models, future research might allow participants to define their own temporal markers or adapt the method to fit individual experiences. Scholars such as Bau (2024) have emphasized the value of timeline drawing as both a visual and art-based method. Bagnoli (2009), as cited by Bau, notes that such methods can elicit unique associations and interpretations, allowing participants to express meaning in creative and often unexpected ways. Providing colored markers and pencils during interviews may enhance the process by allowing participants to emphasize events of particular importance visually.

Another area for exploration is the role of personal objects and memorabilia. During interviews, several participants shared meaningful possessions connected to their drag personas. Building on Mauldin's (2026) research on the symbolic function of objects in caregiving, future studies could invite participants to select and discuss items that carry emotional or cultural weight. This practice could complement verbal storytelling and deepen understanding of how identity, memory, and performance intersect.

Overall, this study offers a foundation for further research that centers on the lives of older drag performers. By expanding representation, incorporating innovative methodologies, and deepening inquiry into kinship, memory, and identity, future studies can continue to

illuminate the richness and resilience of queer life over time.

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